

I think the transition from athlete to coach is still ongoing. It's a process. It's totally different. Only now am I beginning to realize how important coaches were in my life and the battles they fought with me. I remember that when I couldn't go on anymore, I could hear their voices the loudest. It was like a boost. It gave me strength. The coach's voice and image imprint on you for life. Even now, when I coach, I think about how my coach would have handled certain situations and what he would have said. How would he have spoken? Would they have raised their voice or remained calm? And even if I hadn't performed, the coach's imprint would still have been there because willingly or not, the situations in the gym mirror the ones in real life.

ANDREEA CHIȚU

I WANT IN

KYODAI SPORTS CLUB & IL CASSETTO DEI SOGNI

I WANT ON

a Beginner's guide to
inclusion through sports

KYODAI SPORTS CLUB & IL CASSETTO DEI SOGNI



Co-funded by
the European Union



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Some of the names and the identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

**Inclusion is like air. You only become aware of it
when you miss it.**

Authors: Dan Vladimir Gologan, Fabiano Cipressi, Elisa Guerzoni,
Marian Daniel Anghel
Editor: Dan Vladimir Gologan
Graphic: Dan Vladimir Gologan
Photographers: Dan Vladimir Gologan, Luca Rivi

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Kyodai Sports Club

We believe that sports education and physical activity can change lives.

It happened to us.

Whether we want to or not, we influence those around us. So we decided to inspire others, willingly and consciously, to lead an active and healthy lifestyle. We use sports as a tool for inclusion, motivation, and self-help.

Kyodai Sports Club was founded in 2016 as a result of the common passion of several sports-dedicated friends. All the coaches and instructors who founded this association have a background in martial arts. The main goal of the organization was sports performance. But something was missing. We noticed and felt that sport was no longer enough and those who came to train in our gym also needed support, social connection, and guidance. In time, the gym has become a playground, a therapy room, a meeting place for friends, and a place where you can develop.

We came to their aid. We are active in the social field and promote sport and its benefits to everyone.

We now involve in our work children and young people with special needs, young people facing economic obstacles, NEETs, young people at risk of dropping out of school, refugees, and people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds to motivate, educate, and facilitate their inclusion in society.

We are against violence. We practice martial arts, we promote discipline and the development of the fighter spirit in fair play conditions.

Il Cassetto dei Sogni

Il Cassetto dei Sogni asd-ets is an amateur sports association born from the enthusiasm of a team of trainers and instructors who have always been committed to creating opportunities for personal development.

Our activities are accessible to everyone, but we have an eye for the most fragile. Our dream is to create an honest, integer, fair, and meritocratic small world where people can express their talents.

Through sports, recreational activities, and cultural initiatives, we create paths, programs, and moments of sharing and aggregation where everyone can feel welcomed and fulfilled. We believe that with commitment and perseverance, it is possible to eradicate racism, intolerance, and prejudices from society.

Our activities are structured to involve young people, the elderly, people with disabilities or economic difficulties, always in compliance with gender equality.

We are partners and leaders in local and international projects to promote values of inclusion, tolerance, and respect in the community.

We believe youngsters are our future and we try to support them to discover their skills to succeed in life. Knowledge and culture are essential to improve the world around us. We collaborate with schools, and public and private foundations so that our activities can reach the greatest number of beneficiaries, breaking down any architectural or psychological barrier.

UNDERSTANDING

Context

For us, the transition from classical sports activities or commercial activities towards social sports and adding more value through our work was natural. We learn by doing, but this is not always the best. Yes, you don't get stuck in a state of overanalyzing or perfectionism, which, for some, can be incapacitating. But you're prone to making mistakes. Avoidable mistakes.

This guide is about giving back from our discoveries and offering a head start to coaches, sports instructors, or other organizations interested in social inclusion.

We, the two partner organizations involved in writing this guide, had a rather diverse activity. We have promoted sports to everyone for their benefit, working overtime with the vast majority of people with fewer opportunities. In our work, we had a constant component – using sport as a tool for inclusion.

The projects we implemented brought us visibility. We started receiving questions from other coaches and sports instructors about what we do, how we do it, and how we get funded.

We noticed interest but not enough action. We decided to find out what's stopping others from becoming more inclusive. Before starting this project, we sent a questionnaire to 25 organizations from Romania and Italy, which provided relevant information. We found out that 76% of the responding organizations already work with people with fewer opportunities, and more than a third of those participating in the workouts fall into this category. 88% of the above organizations work with several types of people with fewer opportunities (ethnic minorities, young people with disabilities, NEETs, etc.). The context of social inclusion is broad. Because of this reason, the guide does not focus on specific exclusion criteria. We cannot control who comes to our gym. The best we can

do is to gain a better understanding of exclusion and follow inclusive principles in our work.

The responders also stated that the main difficulties in working with people with fewer opportunities are lack of trained personnel, lack of the necessary infrastructure, lack of support from the authorities, lack of funding, and lack of methodologies. 44.6% of the organizations responded that they do not have methodologies to work with people with fewer opportunities. However, following the questionnaire, we found out that some of the respondents confuse training or safeguarding methodologies with inclusive work methodologies. The actual percentage of organizations not following inclusive methodologies is most probably higher.

Through this guide, we aim to respond to the main needs of the coaches and sports instructors and encourage other martial arts and sports organizations to become more inclusive in their work.

Fundraising was purposely left behind for two reasons. The first is that funding opportunities differ from country to country, region to region, or even from one city to another. Secondly, we don't believe we can bring enough added value to the resources that are already out there for free. Non-profit organizations are rarely in competition with each other, except for funding. There are enough issues to be addressed and people in need of help. Collaboration is mandatory in organizational development, but when it comes to funding, it's up to each organization to find the opportunities that fit them best. We understand that, for most trainers, fundraising is a foreign language. Working with a consultant can partially solve this issue, but investing in an in-house fundraiser is best. In-house fundraisers have a deeper understanding of the needs of the organization, its capacity for implementation, and, most of all, the impact it can have on its beneficiaries.

According to the most recent statistics, in the European Union, roughly 95.3 million people, or 22% of the population, struggled with poverty or social exclusion in 2022. This means their households faced difficulties affording basic needs, participating in social activities, or having someone in the household employed.¹ The highest value was reported in Romania (34%), with Italy (24.4%) being slightly over the EU average. Inclusivity has been in the "Europe 2020 strat-

egy" since 2010 as one of the key priorities and continues to be a focus today. Since 2015, it had been experiencing positive developments until the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, remained flat until 2021, and then dropped back. Regardless, the EU failed to reach the intended target of Europe 2020 strategy - a 20 million reduction in the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Young people (aged 16-29) were more likely to be at risk compared to the general population (18+).²

Since most martial arts practitioners are under the age of 34³ we believe it is our duty to become more responsible, get informed about inclusion, and act in a structured manner. The European Union has recognized the social benefits of sport, including its role in promoting social inclusion. In 2001, the Council of Europe called for a renewed focus on ensuring everyone has the chance to participate in sports. This included a specific emphasis on breaking down barriers for people from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with disabilities.⁴ Furthermore, a study published in the journal *Equity and Health* found that sport-for-development programs can be effective in promoting social inclusion, particularly for vulnerable youth.⁵

Young people with fewer opportunities are more likely to turn to contact sports rather than to non-contact sports. First, contact sports like football (soccer) and basketball often require minimal equipment and can be played in public spaces, making them more accessible for those with limited financial resources. Secondly, if they grew up in a harsh environment, they lean towards fighting sports out of the need to defend themselves, develop their strength and self-confidence, or gain independence.

The European Union primarily relies on financial indicators to measure social exclusion. This approach has several limitations. It fails to capture other important dimensions, such as access to education, healthcare, housing, and social participation. These individual and contextual factors contribute significantly to social exclusion. Furthermore, different countries use different definitions and methodologies to measure financial indicators, making it difficult to compare levels of social exclusion across countries.⁶

It is often not within our power to offer financial relief, but we can use our abilities and skills to improve the current situation.

Sport for Social Impact utilizes the power of sports to address social issues and create positive change in communities. It is not just about winning games. It is about using sports as a tool for development and progress. The concept of sports for social impact is growing. It has gained more media coverage, the number of publications in the field is rising, and funding opportunities have increased. The creation of this guide was co-funded through the European Union's Erasmus + Program, which, in the past years, has significantly improved its sports action.

I am not sure if this applies to other countries, but in Romania, we still have a long way to go to shift the focus from immediate problems like urgent health issues towards a longer-term view. Everybody understands the pain and its urgency. For this reason, 55% of donors offer their support to the health sector.⁷ I am not trying to undermine the importance of health. My desire is only to prioritize preventive measures. By supporting organizations that promote healthy lifestyles, preventative medical checks, and health education, we can empower communities to avoid health issues in the first place. Health was purely given as an example. We encourage similar approaches for all the important social issues.

We, the trainers, work directly with the communities. We can foster dialogue and promote new ideas and behaviors. We invest time in the education of future generations, and often, we can have a longer-term perspective. But more importantly, we can gradually change mentalities.

We are privileged to shape the characters of our students. We are privileged to be in contact with many young people who keep us from getting too old or outdated. We are privileged to inspire future generations. For this reason, we have a moral obligation to continue our development, improve ourselves, and fix our traumas.

It's important to mention that the journey to social sports is not necessarily easy. It requires a lot of work, continuous adaptation, and creativity. It will become, at times, inevitably frustrating. There are numerous issues that sports organizations are currently facing that are beyond our immediate control. Regardless, it's the most fulfilling journey we've ever made. I don't find many things even closely rewarding as having such a deep positive impact on people's lives. It is filled with meaning.

Yet sport alone might not be enough in most cases. We need an integrated approach. We need strategic partnerships with other organizations and public institutions with complementary expertise. We need legislative changes and financial support. We need more trained personnel. We need to connect, exchange good practices, and share success stories.

But most of all, we need patience.

I compare social sports with growing trees. If you nurture your sapling, give it enough light, and feed it properly, it will grow into a mature tree and a house for many living creatures. But it will still take years to lie down in its shade.

Like growing a tree, social sports provide benefits that extend far beyond immediate results. In our society, there is an increased pressure for short-term outcomes. Services like same-day delivery, instant streaming, food delivery apps, and social media platforms, however beneficial, artificially increased our need for instant gratification. It took years, or maybe generations, when people with fewer opportunities suffered or lacked basic necessities. Years they were discriminated against. Years we, the majority, discriminated against and stigmatized them. Maybe we didn't know any better, but we're smarter now. How can we have these unrealistic expectations of fixing everything suddenly?

We tend to overestimate what we can do in the short term and underestimate what we can do in longer periods of time. It's imperative to plan and prepare for the long term. You can see this in athletes as well. The most prolific athletes are those who train with regularity and discipline, not necessarily those who look talented in the beginning. Progress is hard to see when you're making small steps. Take a moment to look back.

If you're running a small organization and you're not making yearly reports yet, you should. Yearly reports have many benefits, not only for your supporters but also for you. With its help, you can track progress, set priorities, plan, adapt, or refocus. Don't worry if you don't know what to track at the beginning or how you can analyze the data. You will get to understand what is important to you in time. As in sports, you can't bypass practice.

Finally, we want to issue a warning about a phenomenon that has been increasing in recent years - a growing interest in parents' involvement in sports. Parents play a crucial role in their children's participation in sports, often initi-

ating their involvement and offering tangible and emotional support throughout their athletic journeys.⁸ Parents provide logistical support (transport, access), educational resources, and emotional and financial support.

While there are clear benefits to parental involvement, we want to address the other side of the coin – the growing pressure on youth for sports performance. Emphasis on winning and unrealistic expectations can lead to burnout, injuries, and a loss of passion in young athletes. About 70% of kids drop out of organized sports by their early teens, and the main reasons are that sports are no longer fun or are too stressful. Research shows that disappointing the parents is one of the most common causes of fear of failure in sports.⁹

Reverse-dependency phenomena can occur where parents' self-esteem hinges on their child's athletic performance. They define their own self-worth in terms of their child's success or failure.¹⁰ Sometimes, it is necessary to educate the parent first and then the children, particularly regarding inclusion.

Not all parents engage in negative parenting behaviors. Parents are our main allies in our social work. They are a valuable resource that can boost their children's sports performance, reinforce our teachings, promote our organization, or even bring financial support to our social cause.

We need to spend more time communicating with the parents, understanding their expectations, and establishing a common direction.

What is inclusion?

To the question „What is inclusion, there is no “one” answer.

In the guide creation process, we interviewed many people who facilitated inclusion and asked them what is, precisely, inclusion. We have not received two answers that were the same. Each of us, somehow, understands inclusion. Yet, why is it so hard to define? How can we do inclusion if we don't know what it is? Or if we have different views about what it means? And what does sport have to do with it, anyway?

We believe it all goes back to how we got to understand inclusion in the first place. If you're like most people, you might have first understood inclusion by contrast – when you were first excluded. It doesn't have to be something truly hurtful. It could have been that you were excluded from a children's play by one of the other kids or that your parents had some important thing to do and had to remove you from your favorite group of friends. Or even that you were on vacation, while your friends had a memorable experience that you didn't take part in, and when you came back and heard about it, you felt left apart. At that age, it is improbable that you could understand inclusion in the way you do now, but you got a taste of how it was to live without it.

Inclusion is like air. You only become aware of it when you miss it.

A study by UCLA's neuroscientists Naomi Eisenberger and Matt Lieberman investigated the common brain biology underlying social rejection and physical injury.¹¹ The researchers used a computer game called Cyberball to simulate exclusionary experiences. Subjects were scanned while playing a three-player, virtual ball-tossing game. In the beginning, the two other players threw the ball regularly to the subject, but after a while, they excluded the subject from the game and only tossed the ball to each other. The two other players were just a

computer algorithm designed to do so. Using an fMRI, they scanned the brain of the subject, and they discovered that social pain and physical pain share the same brain network. So, they asked themselves if it would be possible to treat social pain using physical pain medication. And, as it turns out, it is.

They started administering acetaminophen (Paracetamol) to the subjects. Acetaminophen is used to relieve mild to moderate pain by acting on the central nervous system. The subjects who used the acetaminophen pills reported a gradual reduction in their experience of emotional distress. In contrast, the placebo group did not exhibit the same pattern of improvement.

Even though using pills to treat social pain, in certain cases, might be a viable option, that would just be treating the effect and not fixing the cause.

The above only refers to the exclusion from desired social relationships or groups. But exclusion has multiple forms such as discrimination, racism, homophobia, caste systems, gender bias, stigmatization, classism, and others.

Basically, any criteria can be used to exclude someone. It all resumes to the challenge or potential inability of a specific segment of a population to engage in or access various societal activities.

Exclusion also has a strong element of unfairness tied to it. You either can't change the things that you are being excluded for, or it requires a tremendous amount of effort. Other times, it defies your values or violates your human rights.

EU defines social inclusion as a process that ensures citizens have the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social, and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living and well-being that is considered normal in the society in which they live. It encompasses, but is not restricted to, social integration or better access to the labor market and includes equal access to facilities, services, and benefits.¹²

One question that may arise after this definition is what is normality? A friend of mine told me a story about her going abroad as an exchange student. There, she met with her new roommate, and one asked the other: “How are the sockets here?”. “Normal” she replied. One pulled out their normal UK 3-pin charger, and the other the 2-pin EU charger.

Until about one century ago, it was considered normal that women shouldn't be allowed to vote. Current normality doesn't necessarily mean it benefits soci-

ety or the individual.

One can also argue that the “normal” term was purposely left in the definition. Our normality is changing and with it is the need for inclusion.

Social inclusion is a concept that is now central to the European policy agenda. If you look at the European Union’s strategy, all partners have committed to the following 2030 social targets:

- At least 78% of people aged 20 to 64 should be in employment, at least 60% of all adults should participate in training every year.
- The number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by at least 15 million, including at least 5 million children.¹³

A lot of the EU strategy as well as Romania’s and Italy’s national social strategies are focused on the reduction of poverty. The main statistics in Europe on exclusion put poverty and social exclusion in the same research. The two are not separated.

In 2022, Romania was the leader, with 34.4% of its total population being at risk of poverty and social exclusion. On the other side of the spectrum is the Czech Republic, with 11.8%. While in the EU, an average of 1 in 5 people suffered from at least one form of exclusion.

Yet how can you get a job and become a fruitful member of society when you have precarious mental health? And how can you focus on your mental health when you are sick or lacking basic necessities or social support? It is a vicious circle that needs to be approached from different angles at the same time.

It is like you are trying to juggle four balls called health, social relationships, career/education, and basic necessities under a small table. Inevitably, you will drop some of them. It only rarely happens that the “ juggler ” masters the juggling in harsh conditions. And we all love a good Forrest Gump type-of story when all odds are against our hero, yet he succeeds.

Sports can offer multiple benefits that can foster inclusion. One way is that, besides their physical benefits, they develop soft skills useful in a career and everyday life, empower practitioners, improve mental well-being, and foster interaction between participants and their audience.

Sports inclusion is part of a bigger picture called sport for social change, also known as social sports, sports for social impact, or sport for social development.

Sport is particularly useful in fostering relationships between practitioners. There is a common misconception that only team sports promote interpersonal engagement. Of course, team sports can improve your ability to collaborate, but they’re not alone.

Let us take rock climbing as an example. When you start climbing, you start interacting with people who are more advanced than you. Maybe you ask for advice on what equipment you should buy, or you want to find new routes you can try, and you ask them to be your trusted belayer. Slowly, you are becoming a part of the rock-climbing community.

Every sport is a social sport as long as you intend it to be. At Kyodai Sports Club we say: “We practice an individual sport, for which we train as a team!”

It requires extra effort to adapt the workout or change the rules to make your training inclusive for all the participants. The coach/sports instructor needs to facilitate the interaction between the participants. It also requires creating a culture inside the club where everyone is involved in the process of inclusion.

A different approach to sports inclusion is providing access or facilitating participation by making sports accessible and affordable. This would be more properly defined as inclusion in sports. The “sports for all” ideal is harder to achieve in practice, for different reasons, but especially due to lack of resources. While it may be easier to make running affordable for everyone by creating running tracks and cheap shoes, having access to water and boats for sailing is far more difficult.

While sport-based interventions certainly can’t fix all the exclusion criteria they can surely help foster a more inclusive society, or as The World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995 defined it, “a society for all”.

What does “fewer opportunities” mean?

The terms “fewer opportunities”, “disadvantaged” and “vulnerable” people, can differ slightly depending on the country, region, or entity that you’re getting the information from.

However, the terms, if not similar, have at least a strong common root of meaning. For the sake of not overcomplicating things, we’re going to use the term fewer opportunities to describe all the above and their differences. Due to factors often beyond their control, these individuals lack equal opportunities and find themselves in challenging circumstances.

In the glossary of terms of the Erasmus+ program of the European Union, we can find the following definition: „People with fewer opportunities means people who, for economic, social, cultural, geographical or health reasons, a migrant background, or for reasons such as disability and educational difficulties or for any other reasons, including those that can give rise to discrimination under article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, face obstacles that prevent them from having effective access to opportunities under the program.”¹⁴

Article 21 of the Non-discrimination of the Charter of Fundamental rights of the European Union refers to:

1. Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, color, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion, or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited.

2. Within the scope of application of the Treaties and without prejudice to any of their specific provisions, any discrimination on grounds of nationality shall be prohibited.¹⁵

As we can see, these issues are diverse, and we can’t hope for single-point solutions to all the above. Moreover, these individuals may experience a convergence of interconnected issues such as unemployment, lack of skills, meager incomes, discrimination, substandard housing, compromised health, elevated crime rates, and familial disintegration, all contributing to their social exclusion.

Overcoming social exclusion is a difficult challenge, and its persistence across generations is a common occurrence.

Let’s take the history of slavery in Romania as an example. The first mention of the Roma people was in a document from 1385 that tells us that the monastery of Vodița received as a donation from Vladislav I, the ruler of that time, 40 families of Roma. Soon after, the new ruler gave the same people from the Monastery of Vodița to another Monastery named Tismana. The donation mentions the Roma people in a list, among 400 buckets of wheat, a mill, a village, and a pond.¹⁶

Roma people were traded for the price of a horse. They could be sold, donated, or left as a legacy. With their owner’s consent, they could get married, but their children also became the property of the owner. Roma women were forced to have sex with their owners, often the owner being the one to deflower them.

It happened up until 1856 when a generation of young people with progressive views managed to abolish slavery.

After almost 500 years of slavery, when released, those who received compensation were the owners and not the slaves. Freshly free people, lacking education and access to it, with no properties or any type of wealth, most of them chose to continue working for their ex-owners for little money. Without basic needs being fulfilled, they left luxuries such as education behind and focused on surviving. Our whole system of values changes along with the priorities. Children grow up with less nurture and educational models that, as we now know, matter greatly in child development. This is the way trauma is inherited from one generation to another.

After the abolition of slavery, Roma were still segregated and discriminated against. And they still are. If you’re reading this, chances are you inherited or will inherit your family at least one third of an apartment. That gives you a huge advantage over those who have nothing. If you live in a stable country, with time,

property values generally go up, and that helps your heirs lead a dignified life.

Not even 100 years after their liberation, in the Second World War, Roma people were exterminated in the gas chambers, along with the Jews.

In 2021, a survey conducted by the National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania showed that 29% of Romanians believe that the Roma people are "a problem" and 9% say that they represent "a threat to the country".¹⁷

This perception is fueled by the high number of crimes committed by people from the Roma community. However, those statistics fail to show us the actual problem – almost all of the crimes are committed by people with fewer opportunities. Actually, the number of crimes committed by Roma people shows us how vulnerable they are.

In a lot of ways, the situation is similar to the ex-colonies from Africa, Asia, and South America. Countries like Belgium, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Spain, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Scotland, Sweden, Austria, Germany, Portugal, Italy, and Malta, not necessarily in that order, all got rich using free labor force (slaves) and resources from their colonies. The above are some of today's most developed countries, while their ex-colonies are some of the poorest in the world.

In the UK, when slavery was abolished, to avoid a civil war, the government decided to compensate the slave owners for their loss of "capital" through the Slave Compensation Act in 1837. These compensations equaled 40% of the UK's total budget and required a loan that was paid up until 2015.¹⁸ Needless to say, none of that amount went to compensate the slaves. For decades, the UK's population, including, ironically, many descendants of the enslaved, paid for this debt through taxes.

Roma people, in many places, are considered people with fewer opportunities and are often the beneficiaries of projects and social actions, yet some view this as positive discrimination. For example, having special places for Roma admission in high schools and universities sparked heated discussions in Romania. To understand this, we first need to understand the difference between positive discrimination and positive action.

Positive discrimination refers to the preferential treatment, without adequate consideration of qualifications, of individuals from minority groups who

are underrepresented. Positive action, on the other hand, is the implementation of appropriate measures to mitigate disadvantages and overcome obstacles. It aims to avoid any discrimination or negative impact on other people.

A study conducted by the Bank of Saint Luis showed that although black people who finish college earn similar amounts to white college graduates, the racial wealth gap continues to increase. Black college graduates are most likely to be the most successful in their families, and the other members turn to them for help. That leaves them less money to invest in growing assets.

The discussion about reparative justice appears more and more often in our society. It centers on those who have suffered harm, with a focus on remedying past injustices, halting ongoing harm, and preventing the perpetuation of harm in the future. Without it, the inequalities and gaps we'll continue to grow, and we'll inevitably drift away from an ideal working society, a society meant to grow as a whole, not just for the benefit of an individual, a group, or even a country. The development of humans based its evolution on collaboration, and with the age of globalization, we are now at the peak of existence as a race.* All because of our cooperation and connection with diverse individuals. So why don't we improve our human resources, involve everyone, and make use of all our potential?

Research suggests that inclusivity is one of the core principles of restorative and reparative justice, along with the balance of interests, non-coercive practice, and a problem-solving orientation.¹⁹

In the case of people with disabilities, a Eurostat statistic from 2021 shows that 29.7% of the EU population aged 16 years or over with a disability (activity limitation) was at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared with 18.8% of those with no disability. People with a disability were most likely to experience severe material and social deprivation in Romania (31.5%) and Bulgaria (28.4%).²⁰

The situation gets worse when we add other health risks. In the US, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention showed that people with disabilities are two to three times more likely to be obese, smoke, have heart disease, and have

* To be clear, we are aware that globalization also has its downsides and brings many issues, however, we believe we should continue while finding solutions for the problems encountered thus far.

diabetes.²¹

All the above conditions can be improved by being active, taking care of nutrition, and leading a healthy lifestyle in general. But as you can imagine, people with disabilities are up to 62% less likely to meet physical activity guidelines.²² In some way, it's understandable when sports organizations aren't prepared to accommodate them.

Lack of participation does not stem from demotivated individuals. It is imperative to eliminate structural barriers and attend to individual concerns. We need to guide people with fewer opportunities and eliminate or diminish their fears of participation. Clearing the space in the gym to welcome people with disabilities can also benefit the non-disabled, the same way ramps on sidewalks not only benefit people in wheelchairs but also people with strollers or trolly bags.

We can't write in detail about all the fewer opportunities mentioned. Each problem should be analyzed, starting from the general context and moving deeper at the grassroots. Fewer opportunities can be permanent (e.g. Incurable physical or mental disabilities) or temporary (e.g. Being a NEET – not in education, employment, or training). Also, determining whether individuals lack opportunities due to external factors or personal circumstances is crucial.

Since "fewer opportunities" usually also mean having economic obstacles, we believe that we, as sports instructors, coaches, sports clubs, and other organizations, should offer and advocate for free sports courses and free transportation to the sporting facilities. In practice, most of us struggle to find funding for our activities. Striving for common goals can take us one step closer.

Whenever we talk about fewer opportunities, we should also put it in context, especially when writing financing applications. Let's take the case of two very similar young people, one who lives in the center of a big city, and the other one 30 km away from the closest city. Who would be the one with fewer opportunities? If we look at the access to cultural, educational, and sports facilities we would say that the city kid clearly has the edge. But in terms of air and noise pollution exposure or access to freshly grown food, it becomes more vulnerable. Even if we were subjected to similar deprivations, we can react differently, and each individual's particularities can mean different solutions and approaches.

To narrow the gaps it is crucial to prioritize the most vulnerable. Or, as the UN puts it, "Leave no one behind".²³

To offer examples of fewer opportunities, we provide an extract from the Erasmus + Program guide.²⁴ The list of such potential barriers is not exhaustive and is meant to give a reference in taking action with a view to increasing accessibility and outreach to people with fewer opportunities. These barriers can hinder their participation, both as stand-alone factors and in combination:

Disabilities: This includes physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder someone's full and effective participation in society on the same footing as others³.

Health problems: Barriers may result from health issues including severe illnesses, chronic diseases, or any other physical or mental health-related situation that prevents someone from participating in the programme.

Barriers linked to education and training systems: Individuals struggling to perform in education and training systems for various reasons, early school-leavers, NEETs (people not in education, employment or training) and low-skilled adults may face barriers. Although other factors may play a role, these educational difficulties, while possibly linked to personal circumstances, mostly result from educational systems which create structural limitations and/or do not fully take into account the individual's particular needs. Individuals can also face barriers to participation when the structure of curricula makes it difficult to undertake a learning or training mobility abroad as part of their studies.

Cultural differences: While cultural differences may be perceived as barriers by people from any background, they can particularly affect people with fewer opportunities. Such differences may represent significant barriers to learning in general, all the more for people with a migrant or refugee background – including but not limited to newly-arrived migrants, people belonging to a national or ethnic minority, sign language users, or people with linguistic adaptation and cultural inclusion difficulties. Being exposed to foreign languages and cultural differences when taking part in any kind of programme activities may put some individuals off and in a way limit the benefits from their participation. Such cul-

tural differences may even prevent potential participants from applying for support through the programme, thereby representing an entry barrier altogether.

Social barriers: Social adjustment difficulties, such as limited social competences, anti-social or high-risk behaviours; (former) offenders, (former) drug or alcohol abusers, or social marginalisation may represent a barrier. Other social barriers can stem from family circumstances – for instance, being the first in the family to access higher education or being a parent (especially a single parent), a caregiver, a breadwinner or an orphan, or having lived or currently living in institutional care.

Economic barriers: Economic disadvantage, for instance a low living standard, low income, learners who need to work to support themselves, dependence on the social welfare system, long-term unemployment, precarious situations or poverty, being homeless, in debt or with financial problems, may represent a barrier. Other difficulties may derive from the limited transferability of services (in particular support to people with fewer opportunities) that need to be “mobile” together with the participant when participating in activities away from their place of residence or, all the more, abroad.

Barriers linked to discrimination: Barriers can occur as a result of discrimination linked to gender, age, ethnicity, religion, beliefs, sexual orientation, disability, or intersectional factors (a combination of two or several of the mentioned kinds of discrimination).

Geographical barriers: Living in, for example, remote or rural areas, on small islands or in peripheral/outermost regions⁴, in urban suburbs, in less serviced areas (limited public transport, poor facilities) or less developed areas in third countries, may constitute a barrier.

The role and benefits of inclusion

In 2015, all the United Nations member states adopted The Agenda for Sustainable Development – a global initiative that outlines a comprehensive plan to address a range of environmental, social, and economic challenges facing the world. The agenda consists of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 specific targets. These goals provide a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet by 2030.

The UN recognizes sport to be “a cost-effective and flexible tool for promoting peace and development objectives” that can contribute to at least 10 of the 17 SDGs.²⁵

Even though we advocate for personalized interventions and practices, we believe it's important, from time to time, to step back and look at the big picture. It is why we decided to base this chapter on the SDGs. We do not claim nor do we want the list of benefits of inclusion in and through sport to be complete. It serves as a reminder that we are part of a larger collective effort to create a better future for all. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals provide a comprehensive framework that guides our global efforts towards a more equitable, just, and sustainable world.

In this context, sports can be seen as a microcosm of the broader global issues that the SDGs aim to address. By aligning our efforts with these goals, we are acknowledging that inclusion through sports contributes to a more significant and interconnected tapestry of positive change. It underscores the idea that the impact of sports goes beyond the field or court, extending into our communities, societies, and the world at large.

SDG1 No poverty

In 2022, the global sports revenue amounted to nearly 487 billion U.S. dollars (460.7 billion EUR). To put that into perspective, it's more than 1.5 times higher than the whole GDP of Romania in the same year.

By 2027, the global sports market is expected to be worth over 623 billion U.S. dollars. This massive industry includes the people, activities, and organizations that are involved with producing, facilitating, or organizing sports activities.²⁶

Sport can create economic opportunities and jobs. Athletes, coaches, and support staff can earn income through sports-related careers. Sports events also stimulate economic activity in the form of tourism, hospitality, and local businesses.

It can develop employability skills, also often referred to as soft skills, employment skills, work-readiness skills, or foundational skills. These skills are usually not listed in a job description but are skills that make a person desirable for a job. They are transferable to any job in any industry. Engaging in sports fosters essential skills like leadership, discipline, teamwork, and many others. These skills can help people secure better employment and increase their income.

We have previously conducted projects focusing on developing employment skills through sports. They have proven to be a success, especially for NEETs, allowing young people to become financially independent.

SDG3 Good health and well-being

Perhaps this is the most straightforward goal sports can contribute to. Physical activity is one of the most important factors in preventing numerous health problems, starting with those with the highest mortality rates, such as cardiovascular diseases or cancers, and extending to those that some of us are still struggling to accept – mental health issues. It is used as a rehabilitation process to recover from surgeries or other medical conditions, and physical therapy often involves sports-related exercises.

At the beginning of our journey in social sports, we were working in a special school when one teenager came to our trainer and asked if he could help him learn how to get up from the ground. The kid was suffering from tetraplegia, a

condition which manifests with loss of function in all four limbs and the torso. Even though he could walk, he always relied on someone else because if he fell, he couldn't stand up again by himself. Because of this, he couldn't go anywhere without supervision. Imagine, for a moment, how it would be to be watched non-stop while being a teen. It took a couple of sessions until he managed to stand up by himself. The young guy's determination is something we still remember vividly today. At the end of each training session, he would wear himself out trying. This small thing, that we, the non-disabled, are so used to, has improved his quality of life significantly.

Sport can motivate individuals to make healthier choices regarding diet, sleep, and other aspects of their lives, reducing the risk of developing health problems that require medical intervention. Numerous studies have shown it can help with chronic disease management, potentially reducing the need for medication and frequent medical visits. Physical activity is known to reduce stress, which is a major contributor to a range of health problems. Sport provides opportunities for social interaction, fostering a sense of belonging and community. These connections can offer emotional support and reduce social isolation, which is vital for overall well-being.

All the above contribute to an improved quality of life, reduced pressure on healthcare workers, and savings in healthcare budgets.

SDG4 Quality Education

Research indicates that students who participate in sports activities often experience more positive outcomes, both academically and in their professional careers. This improvement may occur indirectly, as there is a positive correlation between physical activity and emotional regulation – the ability to manage emotions in response to the specific requirements of a situation.²⁷

The impact of physical activity is more pronounced when considering socioeconomic status. Early intervention might be the key to improving academic results in young people with fewer opportunities.

Furthermore, many organizations involved in social sports emphasize the importance of education. This motivation can encourage young people to stay in school and improve their long-term career prospects. Athletes may be required

to maintain a certain level of academic performance to participate, promoting educational attainment and reducing the risk of dropping out, which is often a precursor to poverty.

Engaging in activities one enjoys, such as sports, can create a positive feedback loop where students are more motivated to attend school, actively participate in classes, and complete assignments.

SDG5 Gender Equality

In countries where women have greater political influence, there is a tendency for higher representation of female athletes, increased participation of women in sports, and a broader range of women's sports disciplines in which the country is visibly active.²⁸

But isn't the reverse also true?

Sports can challenge and break down traditional gender stereotypes by showcasing the physical prowess, skills, and determination of both women and men. When people see women excelling in traditionally male-dominated sports and vice versa, it challenges preconceived notions about each gender's capabilities.

The presence of strong, accomplished female athletes serves as role models for girls and young women, demonstrating that they can achieve their goals regardless of gender. It can encourage other young girls to participate in sports, boosting their self-esteem, confidence, and leadership skills.

Women's athletics have made significant advancements in the past two decades. For example, the 2023 Women's World Cup final set new television records after an unprecedented turnout of fans at the stadiums. Women's participation in sports can have economic benefits as it expands the market and fan base. Businesses, sponsors, and investors are increasingly recognizing the value of supporting women's sports, which can lead to more opportunities and resources for female athletes. However, the gender pay gap issue persists. In 2018, American women athletes earned between 80% and 84% less than male athletes and the situation is not likely to improve soon.²⁹

Trauma-informed martial arts programs for women that were victims of crimes such as rape or domestic violence are on the rise. Women who have been

in situations where they felt they lost their power gain a greater sense of control and mind-body connection.

Sports can also be used as a platform to influence and advocate for gender equality. Events, campaigns, and initiatives centered around sports can raise awareness and promote positive change.

SDG8 Decent Work and Economic Growth

As we mentioned before, sport is a €460.7 billion industry that is forecasted to grow. The sports industry generates employment opportunities in various sectors, including coaching, sports management, sports medicine, event management, broadcasting, merchandising, apparel, and more. This leads to the creation of jobs and career opportunities for individuals with diverse skills and backgrounds.

Sporting events, from local tournaments to major international competitions, stimulate economic activity in the host regions. This includes spending on accommodations, transportation, food services, and merchandise by spectators and participants. Sporting events attract tourists from around the world, contributing to the economic growth of local businesses.

Sport also has the power to transform lives and provide opportunities for people with fewer opportunities. The stories of athletes such as Usain Bolt, Manny Pacquiao, Cristiano Ronaldo, Serena and Venus Williams, and many others who grew up in poverty or tough neighborhoods serve as a source of inspiration for those facing similar challenges. Their journey tells us that, with talent, determination, and support, it is possible to overcome poverty and achieve success in the world of sports.

A report from the International Centre for Sports Studies in Switzerland shows that approximately 14,000 professional football players, nearly a quarter of the total, are expatriates who have relocated to compete for teams in foreign nations.³⁰

But there is also a dark twist to this dream. The aspiration of becoming professional athletes is sold to young people migrating on small boats from the Middle East and North Africa in a desperate attempt to reach Europe, hoping to achieve safety and a better life.

SDG9 Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure

The way sport interacts with technology has changed greatly to better suit the needs of athletes. We have developed lighter shoes and fabrics that don't absorb sweat. We use video assistant referees and digital twins as virtual representations of athletes, using real-time data from sensors. Athletes wear devices that can monitor their different biometrics and collect data. This data is then analyzed, and based on that data, we improve performance in all fields. This innovation can lead to new business opportunities, job creation, and economic growth in technology-related fields.

Innovations in sports science and medicine have led to the development of advanced diagnostic tools, rehabilitation methods, and medical equipment. One example is smart percussive therapy, used to aid in muscle recovery and alleviate muscle soreness and pain.

Innovation in sports stimulates advancements in various sectors. For example, impact-monitoring stickers track the level and location of impacts during games or training and can warn about concussions or trauma. They can also be used in industries where safety is a concern, such as construction or manufacturing, or as fall detection systems to alert caregivers or medical professionals when a patient experiences a fall.

Hosting sporting events often necessitates improvements in transportation and connectivity infrastructure. This can lead to the construction or upgrade of roads, public transportation systems, and communication networks.

Furthermore, inclusivity in sports infrastructure ensures that sports facilities and events are accessible and inclusive to people of all abilities. This can drive innovation in designing and retrofitting infrastructure with universal access in mind, benefiting a broader range of industries and the population as a whole.

SDG10 Reduced Inequalities

Providing equal access to physical activity is one of the core elements of social sports. The International Olympic Committee views sport as a human right.³¹ Sports organizations should implement and enforce policies that promote equal access to sports for all. They can encourage diverse representation in sports leadership, coaching, and administration to create a more inclusive and equita-

ble sports culture.

Adapted or modified sports programs can accommodate individuals with disabilities or special needs, allowing them to participate fully in physical activities. Outreach programs can specifically target underrepresented groups and encourage their participation in sports.

Sports can be particularly beneficial for people without a supportive family. Often, the coach takes on the role of a parental figure, providing care and support. In the gym, they can find a place where someone cares and is available for them.

Some efforts need to focus on finding funding for financial assistance, scholarships, or subsidies to make sports programs and facilities more affordable for individuals who may face financial barriers. Additionally, efforts should be directed towards creating accessible infrastructure.

It is important to create awareness, inform, and educate our audiences about the benefits of sports participation. Engaging with local communities, schools, and organizations can help create a support network that encourages more people to participate in sports.

Fostering equal access to physical activity and promoting inclusivity in sports can help reduce stigma and discrimination, making it easier for people from marginalized communities to engage in all areas of society, not just sports. People with fewer opportunities, such as lower income, less education, and fewer skills, are less likely to vote and have their interests represented.³² When you feel part of society, you also feel that you can influence political decisions or are entitled to participate in politics.

SDGII Sustainable Cities and Communities

Sustainable cities prioritize efficient urban planning that considers factors such as mixed land use, compact development, and accessibility. One notable example of smart urban planning is New York's High Line. An abandoned railway was transformed into a green space that has since become a symbol of urban renewal and innovation. The High Line is now a popular destination for runners and walkers, serving as a major tourist attraction that draws visitors from around the world. Moreover, it has had a positive impact on property values and

economic development in the surrounding neighborhoods, while also providing a platform for artistic expression and community engagement, enriching the cultural fabric of the city.

As community sports and movements such as street workouts gain momentum, there is a growing demand for additional green spaces within cities. This underscores the need for accessible green areas, which are pivotal in enhancing the overall quality of urban life.

Community sports also foster a sense of belonging by providing a platform for individuals of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities to participate and connect with one another. They offer an opportunity for cultural exchange and understanding, nurturing a shared interest that strengthens social ties and encourages active participation in community life.

It is increasingly evident that companies ranking in the top quartile for gender, racial, and ethnic diversity are more likely to achieve greater financial returns. So, wouldn't this principle apply to communities as well? Can diversity, inclusivity, and mutual understanding help strengthen communities by enhancing cooperation, creativity, innovation, and development?

The connection between social sports and sustainable cities underscores the interconnectedness of urban planning, the economy, recreational activities, and community well-being.

SDGi6 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

One of the most frequently asked questions we've received since we started working with children and young people with fewer opportunities is, 'Are you actually training children and young people who are already prone to violence and teaching them to become better fighters?' I know it sounds counter-intuitive, but yes, and this actually makes them less violent.

First, they have learned to use violence to impress, intimidate, and get what they want, but this approach doesn't work in a kickboxing gym. You can't easily intimidate people who have been training in combat sports for years. In our gym, we uphold values such as collegiality, fair play, and hard work. If newcomers don't adapt to our value system, they often choose to leave on their own.

Secondly, through repeated movements, concentration, controlled behavior,

and respect, participants gain a sense of control, both of the situation and of themselves. When you engage in combat, you're overwhelmed with adrenaline and emotions, but you quickly come to understand the importance of maintaining a clear mind. Over time, fewer negative emotional responses emerge, and violent impulses decrease."

A meta-analysis of studies on martial arts indicates that they have the potential to reduce externalizing behaviors in youth.³³ The mechanisms behind it are not yet clear, but we believe that the values promoted and reinforced by coaches and sports instructors play an important role.

Furthermore, engaging young people in sports activities provides them with a constructive outlet for energy and helps prevent involvement in delinquent behaviors. Sports offer positive alternatives, keeping youth occupied with healthy and structured activities. Additionally, participation in sports can address risk factors associated with criminal behavior, such as substance abuse and lack of supervision. Engaging in sports activities provides a structured environment that reduces exposure to these risk factors.

In some cases, sports programs are integrated into rehabilitation efforts for individuals involved in criminal activities. Sports can serve as a positive and therapeutic outlet, aiding in the rehabilitation process and reducing the likelihood of reoffending. Although several prisons worldwide have adopted effective sports policies and facilities, additional efforts are required to generate a sustained and positive influence.

It is essential to identify and cater to the specific needs of each inmate and offer a variety of sports to increase participation. Collaborations between prisons and external sports organizations and federations can fulfill this need and help recognize potential talent for future employment prospects.

Sport can also serve as a diplomacy platform, as demonstrated during the 1970s when athletes from East Germany, known as 'diplomats in tracksuits,' played a crucial role in establishing East Germany's recognition as a distinct state from West Germany. This practice continues today. Recently, the International Olympic Committee suspended Russia for violating the Olympic charter in response to Russia's decision to recognize Olympic councils from the occupied regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia in Ukraine.

Feeling part of society makes it easier to participate in politics. You feel that your interests and issues are being represented as well. By leveraging the universal appeal and positive values associated with sports, societies can harness the potential of sports to contribute to broader goals such as peace, justice, and strong institutions.

SDG17 Partnerships for The Goals

SDG17 underscores the critical importance of collaboration and partnerships in achieving the other 16 Sustainable Development Goals. It recognizes that no single entity or country can attain sustainable development alone, highlighting the significance of partnerships between governments, the private sector, civil society, and international organizations.

Sports organizations are typically led by coaches and former athletes who have grown up in competitive environments and may be hesitant to share strategies or techniques with potential competitors. This fear of losing a competitive edge can hinder collaboration. However, in the realm of social sports, collaboration is indispensable. We can approach this collaboration in two key ways.

Firstly, collaboration among what we may term 'direct competitors' or other organizations engaged in social sports presents an opportunity to expand our knowledge and enhance our practices in the field. Together, we can wield a powerful voice and raise awareness of the transformative impact that sports can have. We can advocate for increased funding opportunities and improved infrastructure, and we can mount a more effective and rapid response to unexpected challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic or the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

Social sports organizations often do not compete directly with other similar entities. Unfortunately, there is a large pool of potential beneficiaries, and sport-performance should not always be the primary focus.

Typically, social sports organizations only encounter competition when seeking funding. However, this presents an opportunity. Collaborations can assist smaller organizations in generating more projects, accessing larger funding, and making a sustainable impact.

Secondly, social sports organizations and other entities can adopt a more strategic and integrated approach to addressing social issues.

Can sport alone solve all the difficulties faced by those with fewer opportunities? Probably not. Addressing issues such as depression through sport is one aspect, but incorporating psychotherapy, cultural activities, and social support networks adds depth to the approach. Many contemporary challenges are multifaceted and extend beyond the purview of any single sector or industry. Collaboration across sectors facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the issues and the development of holistic solutions. Each sector brings unique resources, expertise, and perspectives to the table.

Increasingly, funding opportunities emphasize cross-sectoral cooperation for its enhanced effectiveness, resource optimization, and innovation fostering. Cooperation extends beyond these categories, encompassing public-private partnerships, transnational collaborations, partnerships between non-profit and for-profit sectors, community engagement, and other forms, each with its own advantages and disadvantages.

The creation of this guide was made possible through collaboration with our international partners and the individuals who generously shared their experiences with us during interviews.

Why do people exclude?

Psychological factors

Why do people tend to view differences negatively?

Everyone, at least once in their life, has experienced the feeling of being excluded, whether from a particular group or within a certain setting. Feeling part of a group is a natural need for humans, the need to belong, to be part of a social unit.

There are many factors (cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural) that can lead to people perceiving differences as negative.

People have a tendency to focus on negative information rather than positive information. This is called a negativity bias.

Psychologist John Cacioppo^{*} has highlighted how our brain has the ability to react more intensely to stimuli it views as negative than to those it views as positive. John Cacioppo's conclusions are backed by an experiment which involved showing images to a group of people and recording the electrical activity of the cerebral cortex to measure the level of analysis of the information. The images were designed to generate different emotions among the subjects, and it emerged that fear, anger, and anxiety are correlated with a significant increase in the brain's electrical activity. The conclusion is that our brain is particularly attentive when faced with situations that could put us at risk.³⁴ Negative events receive more attention than positive events which, not as potentially dangerous, do not require careful examination. The results of John Cacioppo's experiment

^{*} John Terrence Cacioppo (Chicago, 12 June 1951 - Chicago, 5 March 2018) was a Tiffany and Margaret Blake Professor at the University of Chicago. He founded the University of Chicago's Centre for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience and was director of the "Arete Initiative" of the Office of the Vice President for Research and National Laboratories at the University of Chicago.

are hardly surprising and can be easily explained by people's evolutionary need to protect themselves from danger, which must be quickly identified and counteracted with appropriate action to defend oneself.

In the military environment, there is a decision-making process employed in dangerous situations known as the OODA (observe, orient, decide, and act) strategy.³⁵ Individuals are required to continuously observe their surrounding environment, examine their options, decide, and then take action. During this process, the brain must only focus on negative and dangerous stimuli, and disregard positive stimuli. So, negativity bias is not necessarily negative. However, if negativity bias influences interpersonal relationships, it can create issues and lead to exclusion. Essentially, when our brain encounters a person who is characteristically different from ourselves, it triggers protection mechanisms.

Why are we afraid of people who are different from us?

Very often, it is believed that the exclusion of people deemed different can be explained simply as an act of unkindness or contempt, in other words, by conscious, rational thinking. The mistrust that leads us to exclude others can also be an irrational behavior triggered by our innate need to defend ourselves from the outside world, as we explained concerning John Cacioppo's experimentally confirmed theory.

The "fear of difference" is a set of negative emotions and feelings that a person experiences irrationally when faced with individuals who are different from them in some way. It could be the color of their skin, their religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or gender, or perhaps their financial situation or physical or mental health.

Science distinguishes human beings from other species along a binary division. Humans are considered to be a single group, separate from all other animal species.

Society is organized into groups, within groups, within groups, which emerge from and emphasize differences and similarities among people.

This fragmentation of society into groups leads to comparisons between "them" and "us". We emphasize the features and values of a group and consider them characteristic of all its members, cataloging "them - the others" as

different from “us”. The next step, triggered by the negativity bias, is to consider “others - them” as a potential danger and push them away (in nature, the first defense mechanism is flight, i.e. to flee from the source of the danger).

Various scientists have provided a definition of “group” and endeavored to understand if and how a group is more than simply the sum of the individuals it contains.

Gordon Willard Allport^{**} stated: “There is no psychology of groups which is not essentially and entirely a psychology of individuals.”

Muzafer Sherif^{***} said: “One does not do things justice by considering behavior, feelings, and attitudes expressed by an isolated person as intrinsically linked to their conduct as a member of a group. Being a member of a group and behaving as such has psychological consequences that exist even when other members are not immediately present.”

Negativity bias and the formation of groups can lead to the emergence of stereotypes and prejudices.

A definition of prejudice provided by an Italian language dictionary is translated here: “Unfavorable or hostile attitude, in particular when it includes - in addition to superficiality and undue generalization - rigidity, i.e. when it involves a refusal to question its validity and resistance to verifying its relevance and consistency. In sociology and social psychology, the study of social prejudices has taken on great importance due to the practical and political implications thereof, especially in relation to coexistence issues that arise from ethnic prejudices (xenophobia and, above all, racism)”³⁶

From an etymological perspective, prejudices form before an individual has direct knowledge of the matter in question, and they can be positive or negative. For example upon seeing a person with a face covering holding a stick in their hand, I may assume they are a criminal (negative prejudice), or, upon seeing a well-dressed person get out of an expensive car, I may assume they are honest (positive prejudice). Only after having met and gotten to know these two people will the prejudice be confirmed or not, through a process of judgment based on

^{**} Gordon Willard Allport (Montezuma, 11 November 1897 – Cambridge, 9 October 1967) was one of the most renowned social psychologists and a member of the trait theory movement.

^{***} Muzafer Sherif (Odemis, 29 July 1906 – Fairbanks, 16 October 1988) was a Turkish psychologist considered to be one of the founders of social psychology.

thinking supported by concrete information.

From a psychosocial perspective, prejudice is always negative. For example, upon seeing a person of color, or someone who expresses themselves in a way that is somehow confusing, a prejudiced brain will process the information as the existence of danger, never as positive or reassuring.

Gordon Willard Allport, the author of “The Nature of Prejudice (1954)”, endeavored to measure the degree of prejudice in a society according to five levels (Allport’s Scale).³⁷

1. Negative representations and hate speech: the negative comments (antilocutions) that any group (ingroup) makes about those they judge as “different” (outgroup). This level is based on stereotypes, discredit, and speech concerning exclusion and hatred.

2. Prejudices, marginalization: from mere judgments, the next step is now prejudice. Those who are “different” must be isolated and kept away from (avoidance). Those who are “different” are excluded both socially and psychologically.

3. Discrimination: concerns everyday life and relationships (or lack thereof) with those who are “different”. As those who are “different” have to be isolated, they cannot have access to the same opportunities as others. Therefore, those who are “different” are denied the possibility of attending schools, using hospitals, sports facilities, etc. Those who are “different” have no opportunity to express an opinion or be part of the social fabric.

4. Physical attack: after being judged, isolated, and excluded, people who are “different” are no longer tolerated, and prejudice turns to hatred. Those who are “different” suffer episodes of physical intolerance (sexual violence, ambushes, damage to property, etc.).

5. Extermination: the last level. Those who are “different” simply must not exist, and actions to achieve their mass extermination are implemented, resulting in the elimination of the entire group or the most representative members.

Who is different? Different from whom?

Groups tend to form through aspects they share, such as interests, physical characteristics, culture, gender, and religion. As a result, people may be deemed “different” because circumstances concerning them - such as poverty, disability,

tradition, gender, or religion - differ from those experienced by the dominant group.

Once groups have been formed, exclusion and discrimination phenomena can occur in any setting, socially, financially, at work, in education, in politics, in a geographical setting, or sports.

Organizational and structural factors

We have examined the most accredited psychological theories that explain why people exclude, however exclusion also arises from a lack of facilities, or personal factors.

In Italy, six out of ten schools have no sports facilities. This is particularly pronounced in the south, where nine of the ten provinces with the fewest school gyms are located.

In a recent study, Italian associations Sport e Salute (sports and Health) and CUSI (Italian University Sports Centre) highlighted a series of access barriers specifically affecting the dissemination and social value of sport among university students with disabilities.³⁸ These factors are split into structural factors (lack of transportation, lack of aid, inadequate facilities, non-inclusive environment) and personal factors (lack of confidence in one's abilities, low self-esteem, fear of injury, lack of motivation, specific disability)

Exclusion in the past and contemporary Europe

In Greek society, ideal perfection (*kalòs kai agathòs*) was a combination of beauty and goodness. As a result, any imperfection or deformity was repudiated by society. Disability was considered a visual demonstration of moral unworthiness, and therefore people with disabilities had to be kept away from society, and emarginated. For families, the birth of a disabled child was considered both a punishment and a shame. Shame so great that the law permitted infanticide. Rejection of deformity was also found in the Roman Empire.

Nowadays, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines persons with disabilities as "...those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on

an equal basis with others.”³⁹ In the EU, there are approximately 87 million people with some form of disability who do not have the same opportunities in life as others. Very often, public, and private-sector services (schools, workplaces, sports facilities, etc.) are not accessible to people with disabilities. Only 50% of people with disabilities have a job, compared with 75% of people without disabilities. 28.4% of people with disabilities are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared with 17.8% of people without disabilities. 29.4% of people with disabilities obtain a tertiary education qualification, compared with 43.8% of people without disabilities. 52% of people with disabilities feel discriminated against.⁴⁰

History is a repetition of situations where a population (often a white population) has repudiated and massacred indigenous populations exclusively because of the color of their skin. However, it has not always been the case that larger populations dominate minorities. In South Africa, the settler population never represented more than 9% of the population since the first settlements. Apartheid became a system of government in South Africa in 1948. A system of racial segregation was established and remained in force until 1993.

Until the mid-1960s, laws were still in force in the USA that discriminated against the Black population, preventing them from accessing services and denying them the most basic of civil rights.

Today, we would like to think that society in Europe has overcome racial stereotypes and discrimination, but research still presents an alarming situation.

In a report dated 25 October 2023, the FRA (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights), found that: “Almost half of people of African descent in the European Union (EU) experience racism and discrimination in their daily lives, an increase compared with 2016. Racial harassment and ethnic profiling are also common, especially against young people, according to a new investigation by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). FRA urges all EU countries to take urgent measures to address racial discrimination and harassment, to ensure every individual is treated equally and with dignity.”.⁴¹

People of African descent in the European Union have reported being victims of the following: racial discrimination over the last five years (45%), harassment (30%), racial profiling by police (58%), discrimination when looking for a

job (34%) and difficulty finding accommodation (33%)

Since ancient times, women have been entrusted with managing the family and children. For millennia, women have been prevented from holding public roles and denied civil rights.

Even today, many cultures require women to be submissive to men. And things are no better for people with different sexual orientations. On 3 April 2019, a law came into force in Brunei providing for death by stoning for gay men who are Muslims.

Europe advocates gender equality, however, statistics confirm that the gap between men and women persists. In the EU, women are paid, on average, 12.7% less than men. This difference is 3.6% in Romania and 5.0% in Italy. Only in Luxembourg do women have an average salary 0.2% higher than men. France, Finland, Slovakia, Hungary, Germany, Austria, and Estonia all have differences of over 15%.⁴²

In history, rights and privileges were determined by the social class to which one belonged, essentially based on personal wealth. In all societies, the majority of people live with financial difficulties, while a very small percentage of the population is wealthy.

Exclusion/inclusion in sport

We have seen that within human societies, people have always formed dominant groups and submissive groups, based on physical or social characteristics that entirely disregard the value of the individuals. Despite the efforts of institutions, equality and equal rights and opportunities are still a far cry from what they should be in the EU today.

In November 2020, the WHO released the recommended sports levels, broken down by age group and population subgroups. Children and teens (5-17 years, with and without disabilities) should engage in mid to high-intensity physical activity at least 60 minutes per day, on average, prioritizing aerobic activities. Adults (18-64 years) should aim for at least 150-300 minutes per week of mid-intensity aerobic activity or 75-150 minutes per week of high-intensity aerobic activity, or equivalent combinations of the two.⁴³

Actual data often does not reflect that recommendations are being followed.

In Italy, for example, the population shows a great passion for attending sporting events, but less so when it comes to actually engaging in sports and physical activities. Essentially, sport is being watched more than it is played.

According to the OECD, “Italy, France, and Portugal report some of the lowest levels of physical activity among adolescents”.⁴⁴ Italy is classified as a ‘Very sedentary country’, the fourth worst among OECD countries, according to WHO criteria, due to an insufficient level of physical activity among adults, with a sedentary rate of 44.8%.⁴⁵ This data is in line with the latest European Health Interview Survey (EHIS), which ranks Italy 21st in terms of the number of adults that engage in physical activity during their free time: just 26.7% do some form of aerobic physical activity at least once a week, compared to a European average of 44.3%.⁴⁶

Overall, there are not enough sports activities offered in Italy, in particular inclusive and accessible activities. Data from ISTAT (Italian National Statistics Institute) shows how purely sports entities (around 120,000) make up more than 33% of the world of not-for-profit organizations but of these, only 7% (around 8,000) contribute through their activities to the fight against forms of hardship, against an average of 17% of organizations working on the same issue in the “usual” not-for-profit organization.⁴⁷ And to thematize the data, although there are many areas concerned with inclusion through sport, the commitment of sports clubs overall is low in numbers: we are talking about approximately 300,000 beneficiaries of actions to combat hardship. This data, especially if cross-referenced against that linked to our country’s education and inclusion needs, shows how there is a lot to do in terms of offering inclusive sports, much more than today’s lip service to the issue.

The data suggests that urgent action is required to tackle an individual and collective need and allow people to exercise their rights, particularly in this moment in time, in which sport has been included in the Italian Constitution.⁴⁸

READ AND APPLY

Organizational policies

In the previous chapters, we mentioned the way lack of participation in sporting activities is attributable not only to lack of motivation but also the fact that participants need reassurance, which can be provided by removing those fears that often keep them from socializing and, consequently, from engaging in sports.

We, therefore, believe it is the duty of each club to ensure that trainers, members (sportspeople), and fans (including members' families and friends) behave according to guiding principles such as loyalty, honesty, understanding, and inclusion, in order to foster active and peaceful participation.

We believe that one valid way of achieving this goal and raising awareness of the importance of fair and inclusive behavior in all relations could be by establishing a code of ethics, which could simply be a set of rules of conduct with an outline of the principles that inspired the founding members.

Compliance with this code of ethics could also be used as a basis for acceptance or exclusion of any staff members or sportspeople in the organization who openly disregard its values.

The Code of Sports Ethics promoted under the European Sports Charter (ESC) by the Council of Europe - which aims to promote sport as an important factor for human development - also guides the principles that should be disseminated. For further information check out the entire document.⁴⁹

The following section outlines a series of basic ethical principles aimed at staff, sportspeople, and spectators and considered essential for fair play. Each club can add to and adapt this information to create its own ethical charter, providing further guidance for its own stakeholders.

Ethical charter for staff

Principle 1

Take on social responsibility (i.e. take on responsibility, as an organization, for the consequences of the club's decisions and activities on society and the environment, behaving ethically and transparently and contributing to sustainable development, including the health and wellbeing of society), respect the institutions, the other sports clubs, your opponents, and the referee, and look after the facilities and equipment.

Principle 2

Set an example for sportspeople through consistent, fair, polite, and rule-abiding behavior.

Principle 3

Help each other and work with all staff.

Principle 4

Always show the utmost respect for others, based on their role and their dignity as a person, even when misunderstandings arise.

Principle 5

Inform sportspeople of choices and decisions made, and clarify any doubts they may have, including their family if appropriate, and learn to listen to everyone's needs without making any judgments.

Principle 6

Bear in mind the participants' stages of development. Take steps to prevent excessive physical and mental load. Always wait as long as is necessary to ensure their psychological and physical recovery following an injury.

Principle 7

Be responsible and professional in your work. Set motivating achievable goals.

Principle 8

Focus on the importance of both the person and the sportsperson, refraining from falling into generalizations not applicable to the situation in hand.

Principle 9

Encourage all sportspeople to learn and make them feel part of the group.

Principle 10

Help ensure that the sports environment is safe and healthy.

Principle 11

Never assume you know everything.

Ethical charter for athletes

Principle 1

Follow the club rules.

Principle 2

Follow the rules of the team and the game.

Principle 3

Respect your teammates' privacy and integrity when we meet outside the gym during everyday life.

Principle 4

Respect your trainer and their decisions. If something is unclear, ask for clarification.

Principle 5

Organize your time (between school, sports, and friends) so that you are always active.

Principle 6

Accept defeat gracefully.

Principle 7

Treat referees and your opponents with respect.

Principle 8

Root for your teammates.

Principle 9

Be proactive and try to create a healthy, peaceful environment that is pleasant to live in.

Principle 10

Help ensure the sports environment is safe and healthy, both physically and emotionally.

Principle 11

Participation comes first, results second.

Ethical charter for parents and fans

Principle 1

Follow the club rules.

Principle 2

Follow the team rules.

Principle 3

Treat those working for the club with due respect based on their role and expertise and accept their decisions.

Principle 4

Root for the whole team and accept defeat gracefully.

Principle 5

Accept sportspeople's limits, be they physical, technical, or internal.

Principle 6

Console your children and acknowledge and discuss negative emotions without making judgments or laying blame.

Principle 7

Communicate with each other to clear up any misunderstandings, without making judgments.

Principle 8

Value your children's talents.

Principle 9

Allow your children to choose whether or not to strive to become champions. Failure is part of growth.

Principle 10

Help ensure that the sports environment is safe and healthy.

Principle 11

Participation comes first, results second. All fans and spectators must remember that sport is a game. Respect for the clubs, people, and rules is essential to ensure sports are a healthy form of enjoyment in an inclusive, welcoming, and tolerant environment.

Is my organization ready to work with people with fewer opportunities?

The primary objective of this chapter is to provide sports organizations and coaches with a tool for assessing their current practices regarding inclusion.

The following self-assessment matrix is designed to be completed by members, employees, volunteers, and other stakeholders of your organization. To obtain a more accurate view of current practices, we recommend that as many people as possible participate in filling it out.

When completing the matrix, if you find yourself between two possible answers, select the one that best describes the current circumstances. It’s important to be truthful and avoid projecting how you would like the practices in your organization to be.

The sections labeled ‘Clear and Complete’ present an organizational ideal related to inclusion. While we recognize that each organization, its needs, and its context are unique, the interpretation of the results remains at your discretion.

We propose four different ways of using the matrix:

- Assess the current practices in your organization regarding inclusion and identify strengths and weaknesses.
- Identify discrepancies between the perspectives of different individuals in the organization and improve internal communication.
- Utilize or modify the ‘Clear and Complete’ sections for future planning.
- Monitor the evolution of your practices by revisiting the matrix after 1-2 years.

When developing a plan to enhance inclusivity in your organization, we advise focusing on no more than three aspects at a time. Change requires time, dedication, and a trial-and-error process until you find what works best for

your organization. Incremental, gradual improvements are key to avoiding overwhelm.

The creation of this matrix was inspired by an organizational matrix developed by the Foundation for the Development of Civil Society (FDSC), the Center for Information, Cooperation and Development of NGOs (CNVOS), and the European Network of National Organizations of Civil Society (ENNA) as part of the project “Organizational Development for Youth Organizations,” co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.⁵⁰ We incorporated sections of the organizational matrix that pertain to inclusion. If you find this inclusion matrix helpful, we suggest also completing the FDSC’s organizational matrix, which covers additional aspects related to organizational development.

Management

To what extent are the mission and vision of the organization clear?

None	We don’t have a mission and/or vision.
Limited	The mission and vision are written, but the organization does not follow them. They are unclear or too vast.
Partial	The mission and vision are written. The organization does pursue them, but there isn't a common, clear understanding among the members.
Clear	The vision and mission of the organization are clear and are often considered in directing actions and establishing priorities.
Clear and complete	The vision and mission are clearly written, constantly reviewed, and assessed, promoted, and followed in all activities of the organization.

To what extent is a strategic plan implemented in the organization?

None	We do not have a strategic plan.
Limited	We do not have a written strategic plan, but the organization is guided by some directions in its activities.
Partial	There is a written strategic plan, but we seldom follow it.
Clear	There is a written strategic plan, but we do not fully follow or evaluate it.
Clear and complete	The organization has a strategic plan that is fully implemented, reviewed, and assessed regularly.

Is there a governance structure for the organization?

None	We do not have a governance structure.
Limited	We do have a governance structure, but its role is primarily formal.
Partial	There is a governance structure, but it merely formalizes decisions made by the leader(s) of the organization, with limited understanding of its role.
Clear	The governance structure understands its role to a relatively large extent and is sometimes consulted for the organization's strategic decisions.
Clear and complete	The governance structure fully understands its responsibilities, makes strategic decisions for the organization, and successfully fulfills its duties.

In what way are people with fewer opportunities involved in organizational decision-making?

None	People with fewer opportunities aren't involved at all in the organizational decision-making process.
Limited	We represent the needs and interests of people with fewer opportunities, but we often don't consult them.

In what way are people with fewer opportunities involved in organizational decision-making?

Partial	We consult with people with fewer opportunities, but the decisions are ultimately made by the leader(s) and are often not communicated to the rest of the organization.
Clear	We consult with people with fewer opportunities. The decisions are taken only by the members of the staff. The decisions are communicated.
Clear and complete	The decision-making process is participatory and transparent. People with fewer opportunities are involved in the process, and their needs and interests are represented. The decisions are communicated to all the members.

Is there a current monitoring and evaluation practice in the organization?

None	We do not monitor or evaluate our activities.
Limited	Monitoring and assessment are done only when requested.
Partial	We monitor and evaluate a few standard activities, but only at the results level. Other measurements are not taken into account.
Clear	Monitoring and evaluation are carried out only for specific activities. We do not have practices of constant monitoring and evaluation.
Clear and complete	Constant monitoring and evaluation are carried out for all activities, including assessing the impact.

Practices and facilities**Does your organization practice deliberate and structured inclusion, or does it just happen?**

None	We do not practice inclusion, and it is not the purpose of our organization.
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Does your organization practice deliberate and structured inclusion, or does it just happen?

Limited	People with fewer opportunities sometimes come towards our organization and get involved in our activities, but it is not the purpose of our organization.
Partial	People with fewer opportunities are welcomed and involved in our activities. We have designed activities to include them, but we are not actively seeking them out.
Clear	We actively try to bring diverse people into our group and seek inclusion through sports. We have methods and policies, but not the entire team follows them consistently.
Clear and complete	We use sport as a method of inclusion. We have well-structured and written methods, and we cater to the needs of people with fewer opportunities who participate in our activities.

Does your organization have organizational policies regarding inclusion?

None	We do not have organizational policies regarding inclusion.
Limited	There are no written organizational policies regarding inclusion, but the organization follows some directions in its activities.
Partial	There are written organizational policies regarding inclusion, but they are not fully followed.
Clear	There are written organizational policies regarding inclusion. They are broadly followed, but they are not regularly evaluated.
Clear and complete	There are written organizational policies regarding inclusion that are fully respected, implemented, reviewed, and assessed regularly.

Does your organization have activities and methodologies designed for people with fewer opportunities?

None	People with fewer opportunities are welcome to our usual activities, just as others are.
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Does your organization have activities and methodologies designed for people with fewer opportunities?

Limited	There are no written activities or methodologies, but we seek to adapt our training to everyone's needs.
Partial	There are some written activities and methodologies, but we don't always follow them.
Clear	There are written activities and methods. They are usually followed, but they are not regularly updated or evaluated.
Clear and complete	There are written, well-structured activities and methodologies that are implemented, reviewed, and evaluated regularly. We continuously update our methodologies.

Is the equipment and the place where you carry out your activities suitable for people with fewer opportunities? (e.g. people with different disabilities)

None	No. We do not take accessibility into account. Members leave their bags and shoes erratically, and the path is not always clear.
Limited	The equipment and place where we carry out our activities are not accessible to people with fewer opportunities, but we keep in mind clearing the space, adapting the current equipment, and offering help when needed.
Partial	The place where we carry out our activities is accessible to some people with fewer opportunities. We have some special equipment, and we also try to adapt activities to the existing equipment.
Clear	The place where we carry out our activities is accessible to all people who come to our organization, but we don't make improvements, or improvements are not under our control. We have enough special equipment.

Is the equipment and the place where you carry out your activities suitable for people with fewer opportunities? (e.g. people with different disabilities)

Clear and complete	We always ensure that the place where we carry out our activities is accessible to all the people who come to our organization, and we are always interested in making improvements. We try to update the equipment constantly according to the needs of people with fewer opportunities.
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How are people with fewer opportunities involved in these activities?

None	We do not involve people with fewer opportunities.
Limited	We have designed special activities only for people with fewer opportunities.
Partial	We have parallel activities where people with fewer opportunities train separately.
Clear	We have open activities where people with fewer opportunities are involved along with others. The activities are, by their nature, inclusive to suit every participant.
Clear and complete	All people train together in modified activities designed for all, with adaptation for space, tasks, equipment, and instructional approaches to accommodate each individual and their goals.

Human capacity and knowledge

Who are the people in your organization who work with people with fewer opportunities?

None	None of the members of the organization work with people with fewer opportunities.
Limited	Only one person or a few people from the staff are open to working with people with fewer opportunities. They have no experience, but they are willing to learn.

Who are the people in your organization who work with people with fewer opportunities?

Partial	All the staff work with people with fewer opportunities, but only one or a few understand the challenges they face and have experience with inclusion. The person is often overwhelmed.
Clear	We have a small team dedicated to inclusive work that can also share their knowledge with the rest. In some cases, we consult with experts from related fields of work (e.g. psychologists, physical therapists, etc.).
Clear and complete	We have a team with experience in inclusive work. We also have support staff (e.g. psychologists, physical therapists, etc.) who are constantly involved in inclusive work. We train new people in the field.

How is the organization's staff trained for inclusive work?

None	Our staff isn't trained for inclusive work.
Limited	The process of inclusive work is intuitive, and learning occurs through trial and error.
Partial	Improving knowledge related to inclusive work is the responsibility of each staff member. Some members are more interested and read information on the topic, but sharing information is rare.
Clear	We provide training for our staff, although not regularly. Experienced staff members train others.
Clear and complete	We have a well-structured training process for staff members and volunteers. The knowledge is up to date, aligned with most research in the field, and approved by experts.

Does your organization make use of volunteers?

None	No. We don't have volunteers.
Limited	We have some occasional volunteers, but they are not involved in inclusive work.

Does your organization make use of volunteers?

Partial	We have some occasional volunteers who are involved in inclusive work.
Clear	We involve volunteers in inclusive work, but they are not trained. Their responsibilities are not formally established and are not always respected.
Clear and complete	We often involve volunteers in our work. We have good volunteer management. The volunteers are trained before being involved in inclusive work.

Have you ever implemented projects related to social inclusion?

None	No. It is not the purpose of our organization.
Limited	No, but we are open and willing to try, although we are uncertain where to start.
Partial	We were partners in a few projects that involved inclusion, but our role was minimal.
Clear	We were involved in several projects related to inclusion.
Clear and complete	We constantly seek to do inclusion-related projects and access funding in this field. We measure our impact and constantly improve our work.

How diverse is the organization's staff?

None	The staff only consists of one person who handles all the work.
Limited	The staff consists of a few members who are very similar (e.g., white males in their 40s with similar backgrounds).
Partial	The staff consists of a small number of people. While there is some diversity, it wasn't taken into account when the team was constituted.

How diverse is the organization's staff?

Clear	Diversity was considered when creating the team; however, the focus was on other aspects. The team is mostly composed of people with similar backgrounds, and minorities seldom have decision-making roles.
Clear and complete	Several different groups of people with fewer opportunities are represented among the staff members at various decision-making levels. Diversity was one of the core principles when creating the team.

Financial capacity**How is your organization's financial management?**

None	We cover expenses as they arise without planning, tracking, or evaluating them.
Limited	We have some financial management for each project or activity, but there are no common practices or procedures.
Partial	We have common procedures and practices for financial management, but they aren't always followed, and we lack centralized financial management.
Clear	We have a person in charge of overall financial management, and we follow common procedures and practices, although there are no procedures for monitoring.
Clear and complete	We have a dedicated person who tracks the income and expenses of the organization, monitors cash flow, and ensures that money is spent efficiently.

How is your organization's capacity to access funding?

None	We operate solely as a commercial organization, where individuals pay a membership fee to participate in training.
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How is your organization's capacity to access funding?

Limited	We have 1-2 sources of financing (such as donations or sponsorships), but the funding is not consistent, and we have limited knowledge of accessing additional financing sources.
Partial	We have the capacity and knowledge to access multiple funding sources, although making reliable financial forecasts is challenging.
Clear	We were involved in several projects related to inclusion.
Clear and complete	We access funding from various sources, some of which are sustainable or recurring. We create financial forecasts for one year or more and continually enhance our fundraising capacity.

Does the organization have a dedicated budget for working with people with fewer opportunities?

None	No, we don't have a dedicated budget for people with fewer opportunities.
Limited	No, but we offer benefits such as discounts or free memberships for people with fewer opportunities.
Partial	Yes, we allocate resources from the organization's budget to cover some expenses for people with fewer opportunities, but the budget is limited.
Clear	We have some financing sources to cover the expenses of people with fewer opportunities, but these sources aren't sustainable or constant.
Clear and complete	The organization has different sources of financing for people with fewer opportunities, with some that are sustainable. The budget covers all activities and necessary equipment. We always seek out new sources of financing.

Does your organization measure and try to optimize the cost-effectiveness of your social actions?

None	No, we don't track the impact of our actions.
Limited	We observe the results and impact, but we don't constantly track them or maintain records.
Partial	We observe the results and impact of our actions and maintain records. We have some indicators to measure our actions, but optimization is mostly done through direct observation.
Clear	We have clear indicators for the results and impact of our actions. We try to improve the cost-effectiveness, but not always strategically or adapted to the needs of the individual.
Clear and complete	We carry out inclusion activities, keep records of the results and impact, and analyze the data to optimize resource consumption. We also consider the complexity of each individual case

Does your organization collaborate with other organizations or institutions?

None	We do not cooperate with other organizations or institutions.
Limited	We have a few organizations and institutions with which we cooperate and collaborate. The collaboration is usually unidirectional and punctual (to solve a specific aspect).
Partial	We collaborate with several private and public organizations. Sometimes we have joint projects and develop common practices.
Clear	We have a network of private and public organizations and institutions with which we collaborate and share practices, but our strategies are not planned together.
Clear and complete	We have a network of private and public organizations and institutions in different fields of work with which we collaborate. We regularly share practices and consult with each other. We have a systematic and integral approach that we plan together.

Support

How much attention does the coach pay to the behaviors and interactions of the athletes and members?

None	All the coach’s attention goes to improving the sports skills and physical abilities of the athletes and members.
Limited	The coach addresses inappropriate behaviors and takes appropriate measures when necessary.
Partial	The coach intervenes to stop harmful behaviors and mediates conflicts. They sometimes notice changes in behavior and seek to understand the reasons behind them.
Clear	The coach encourages cooperation, identifies inappropriate behaviors early, and supports the athletes. They often observe mood changes and interactions between athletes.
Clear and complete	The coach prioritizes the personal development of all athletes, regularly communicates with them, and seeks to understand their individual challenges. They are always available when needed and may take on a supportive role akin to that of a parent figure.

Is there a method of receiving or introducing new members?

None	No, the new students present themselves and try to integrate into the group as much as they want and to the best of their abilities.
Limited	No, but some members are welcoming and interact with the newcomers, making them feel welcome.
Partial	Yes, the coach pairs newcomers with other members and facilitates their interaction, but only a few members interact with the newcomers in the first weeks.

Is there a method of receiving or introducing new members?

Clear	Yes, we have a clear process for introducing new members to the team. We use name games, icebreakers, or similar activities to facilitate introductions. We sometimes organize activities outside of training sessions to allow people to get to know each other better, although time constraints may limit these opportunities.
Clear and complete	Yes, we have a well-established process for introducing new members which is ingrained in our organization’s culture. All members are familiar with the process and actively participate in it. We regularly organize activities outside of training sessions to foster stronger relationships among members.

How personalized is the training conducted for each practitioner or member?

None	Every member does the same exercises and is encouraged to do their best.
Limited	We have separate beginner and advanced training groups, with exercises tailored to different levels of complexity and diversity.
Partial	We primarily follow the same training regimen for all practitioners, but we adjust the complexity and intensity for those who struggle with certain exercises.
Clear	We inquire about newcomers’ training goals and create personalized workout plans accordingly. We adapt exercises, complexity, and intensity to individual needs, although tracking and adjustments may not always occur.
Clear and complete	We regularly reassess everyone’s training goals and adjust exercises, complexity, and intensity accordingly. We track progress and gradually increase exercise complexity and intensity. Our focus is on progress rather than performance.

How inclusive are the other non-staff members of the organization (athletes)?	
None	Non-staff members rarely interact with people with fewer opportunities.
Limited	Non-staff members occasionally engage with people with fewer opportunities and new members voluntarily.
Partial	Staff members promote interaction among all groups, and non-staff members show care and attentiveness towards people with fewer opportunities and newcomers.
Clear	We've fostered an organizational culture where seasoned members actively welcome and include newcomers, irrespective of their opportunity status. This culture naturally extends to newer participants through positive examples.
Clear and complete	We've cultivated a fully inclusive organizational culture, actively facilitating interactions among all members. We organize events and activities designed to foster personal connections, which are often open to the public or external individuals.

How do you motivate the participants?

None	Our organization emphasizes performance, prioritizing competition results in member selection.
Limited	We select the best performers from our member pool to compete, using their success as an example for others.
Partial	While some members thrive on competition, our primary focus is on promoting sports in general.
Clear	We identify each individual's motivation and tailor the workouts accordingly, emphasizing self-improvement over competition. Everyone, including those with fewer opportunities, is treated equally.

How do you motivate the participants?

Clear and complete	We employ a system focused on fostering positive emotions and boosting self-confidence through a sense of achievement. We recognize and praise the effort and progress of each individual, especially providing additional positive reinforcement for those with fewer opportunities.
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How do you identify people with fewer opportunities?

When talking about identifying people with fewer opportunities we should consider two possible scenarios.

The first one is that, if you are like most of the sports trainers, random people who are interested in your sports area come to your organization to train. Maybe they found your website, or they heard about your gym from a friend. You probably don't have much information about these people, their background, or their current situation.

Of course, some aspects may be easily identifiable such as physical disabilities or race, yet others can be somewhat concealed.

A.R. was a young student who came to train in our gym. She was hardworking, always friendly, and loved to be a part of the team. She stayed longer in the gym after the end of each training session than most people did. Yet she never expressed her will to become a professional fighter and rarely trained extra after the end of the training sessions, so it had to be some other reason why she was there for so long. Either she was running away from something, or she was really enjoying being there. Or both.

However, even though she was always present in the gym, whenever we had extra activities like going to training camps, going for a pizza, or other types of gatherings, she was always telling us that she had something else to do in that particular day, or that her mom wouldn't allow her to go.

Now, most of our members are paying members. We have a monthly fee, and she was paying for her workouts, so we weren't aware of her financial difficulties. But after a few declined invitations and some hesitant answers from her side about the actual reasons for her refusal, we got this idea that it might have

to do something with the money.

But how can you get a person to openly talk about their fewer opportunities, about something which they would rather deny than risk being looked at differently? When suddenly, luck hit us.

In the summertime, we have training camps outside of the city, in the mountains or at the seaside. It's a change of scenario that benefits us all. We, as trainers, get to spend more time with our students and get to know them better. The students get to be away from their families with their friends and do something they like, and the parents take a break while knowing their children are in a safe environment. Unfortunately, these sorts of experiences bring an extra cost that not everyone can afford.

A few days before the summer camp started, one of the participants' parents called us to let us know that her kid could no longer come. Accommodation, food, and other facilities were booked and paid for in advance, so the option of reimbursement was no longer available. The parents asked if somebody else could benefit from the already booked spot, and our thought immediately went towards A.R.

The first reaction of A.R. was to decline, but we were expecting this. Rejection to receive help can have different roots such as personal pride, feeling undeserving, or associating with incurring a burdensome sense of obligation.⁵¹ She needed some convincing. We explained that if she didn't come, the money would be lost. We pointed out how she was always staying extra at the gym, and because of her involvement, we wanted her to benefit from this paid spot. We also asked for some help in return, so she felt she was giving something back. We managed to talk to her mother as well and slowly got to know more about their situation. As months passed by, she became more open towards our team so we could offer better support.

Now, she is involved in our project writing. Contribution is a powerful tool we use to make sure our students feel worthy while we also hold them accountable.

Through observation, one can manage to identify the vulnerabilities of the participants. Just like we notice our students' mistakes in the sports field and continuously try to improve those, the same way we should observe the participants as a whole. And without looking for something in particular, after a while,

something might pop out. Maybe it's something they say, how they feel, how they react, how they interact with others, or the fact that they're always tired. This observation can lead to improving our relationship and, eventually, with proper intervention, diminishing their issues. And it can benefit sports performance too.

After observation, the next step should be communication, but the approach must be well thought out. There is a thin line between being intrusive or pushy, which, regardless of our good intentions, can make people act defensive, and sparking that useful conversation that can eventually lead to inclusion. We always recommend that coaches who work with people with fewer opportunities should be trauma-informed. It's not necessary to have a Ph.D. in psychology, but it is necessary not to make the trauma worse.

Openly expressing your availability to discuss, with any student, any issue they may be facing has proven useful to us, not only for the people with fewer opportunities but for all our students. It should be done with regularity but not too often. Once every month or so should be enough for the students to acknowledge the coach's availability.

About a year ago, B., one of our young students, stayed in the gym until everyone else left to talk to the coach. He was shaking even before speaking. "What happened?" the coach asked. "I have two bad grades at school, and I don't know how to tell my father" he replied. After carefully assessing the situation to make sure there was no abuse happening at home, the coach worked with the student to find the best way to tell the father.

We, as coaches, have an important role in educating our students, not only in the sports we are training. No matter how good of a trainer we are, most of our students won't become professional athletes. But we can help them sail into adulthood with a better mindset and improved soft skills. The tough job of a parent requires a great balance between positive and negative reinforcements. We, the trainers, are lucky. Even our punishments aren't that bad. They usually consist of more push-ups and squats, and after all, that's why the students are there. Punishments at home can mean taking away something they truly enjoy, like their phone or their video game console.

We, on the other hand, have this easy communication gateway that we can

use. Wouldn't you want your kid to receive advice from someone who has emotional maturity and a better understanding of the long-term consequences of their decisions?

It took B. about a month since he got the grades until he came to talk to the coach. He was afraid that his father wouldn't allow him to go to the gym anymore, so our coach advised B. to tell the truth – to tell the father that he first talked to the coach, that he was sorry, as he seemed to be, and that he will do his best to fix his grades. They even rehearsed the speech together.

The above wouldn't be possible without trust. Trust is built in time, with consistency, stability, and positive interaction. But trust also has this social feature of being transferable. As your students see each other calling for your advice, it signals that talking to you is safe and extends horizontally among the entire group. It creates an environment where seeking help is viewed not as a sign of weakness but as a proactive step towards personal growth. Students begin to recognize that the coach is not just a figure of authority but a reliable and understanding mentor. He becomes a central figure in the overall development of the students.

The second scenario is when you actively seek to bring more diversity to your sports organization. These so-called outreach programs target underrepresented groups and encourage their participation in sports.

To build a successful outreach strategy it is important to answer the following questions:

1. **What do you want to achieve?**

Maybe you want to inspire more people to do sport for its health benefits. Maybe you believe you are a great facilitator and can make sports fun for everyone. Or maybe you believe that if you have a more accessible gym, it will bring more revenue to your sports organization.

Whatever the reasons, be honest and have those clear in mind when creating your outreach strategy.

2. Which types of fewer opportunities are you comfortable working with?

It's alright if you're not yet comfortable to work with anyone. Making things worse for people with fewer opportunities is a legitimate concern, and going totally outside of your comfort zone might not be the best idea.

Write down what fewer opportunities you would like to work with and what types of fewer opportunities you're not yet comfortable working with. With time, as you gain confidence, you might want to extend these target groups.

Progress is achieved faster step by step.

3. What sorts of people would bring more diversity to your gym?

What is your gym missing the most at the moment? Maybe you want to encourage more girls to participate in contact sports because you believe it would boost the energy and motivation of the guys. (P.S. It does). Or maybe it would be useful to encourage older people or the student's parents to join the workouts to have a place to bond and share experiences.

See the group as a whole. Do not focus on the individual in the beginning.

4. Who lives in the proximity of the gym?

Logistic aspects matter. Ease of access and proximity to the gym are important factors to keep your students involved long-term, particularly if you live in a big city. Are there any fewer-opportunities communities living close to your gym? Are you willing to commute to other neighborhoods to train the fewer opportunities groups you want to target? The easier it is to get to the gym, the bigger the chances for people to come.

5. How can you reach your targeted audience?

Select the most appropriate communication channels to reach your target audience effectively. It can be tempting to say that online advertising can solve everything. The digital advertising impact is often exaggerated⁵², and there may be other, more effective, ways to reach your audience while also saving some of that advertising budget.

Are there other organizations working with these communities that you can partner with? Is there any place you can easily find and discuss with your target

groups? Are there any other people who already have the trust of the people that you are targeting?

Strategic partnerships can not only help you leverage their credibility and reach your target audience. But also unlock new funding opportunities.

Remember, a well-designed outreach strategy isn't just about attracting new faces. It's about creating a welcoming and inclusive environment where everyone feels valued and empowered to participate.

How to prepare your staff

One of the project partners' main goals, alongside teaching sports or martial arts, is to offer an organization that young people can turn to so that those who join our clubs can grow and develop personally with our support. We want to offer inclusive activities and places where all young people can feel at home; a place where they can grow, develop skills, and discover what kind of person they want to become, using sport as a tool to achieve this.

To enable this, a club has to be more than just a place you come to learn a sport, just as it has to be inclusive not only in name but also in deed. Through trainers, instructors, and youth leaders, clubs must actively strive for and maintain inclusion. Clubs must become a place where those who come to learn a sport can bring with them their emotions and experience, in all senses of the word. Sports must offer young people the opportunity to experience activities that help them reflect on things and build a positive identity.

Instructors often become role models for young people, which means they must be an authoritative guide for them, someone who offers learners of sports a stimulating, reassuring relationship.

This is especially true of those who decide to work with disadvantaged people; instructors must endeavor to really know their learners of sport, to understand them, and teach them the importance of being unique. An instructor-learner relationship must always be helpful and encouraging, never belittling.

Through the activities they offer, sports clubs bring together instructors and learners, creating an environment in which they can (and must) train their staff to work inclusively. After all, learners of sport are engaging in an activity they care about, which makes it easier for instructors to do their job - which must be based on dialogue, discussion, support, and teaching, as well as the values en-

shrined in the code of conduct applicable to each sport.

We, therefore, believe it is important to identify which skills instructors or (in the case of martial arts) masters, as well as assistants and staff in general, should develop in order to organize activities that can help them achieve these goals.

The skills of an inclusive instructor must be constantly refreshed in multiple areas, each one consistently with the others. Alongside technical skills, new soft skills will appear, linked to fields such as psychology, pedagogy, and anthropology.

Instructors are inclusive when they...

- are able to recognize their learners' needs and adapt activities according to their motivational, cognitive, and physical differences.
- are able to make the most of their learners' resources and inclinations so as to include all learners, each one according to their own potential.
- are able to put learners at ease, identifying their emotional needs and acknowledging the importance of their commitment.
- understand that the well-being of their learners is a primary objective of their work.
- are able to plan activities in a simple, flexible way, adapting them to the different abilities of their learners so that everyone can draw on their potential.
- work with other instructors to arrange coordinated, integrated sports activities.
- are able to monitor the progress of their learners, involving them in self-assessment activities and acknowledging how far they have come.
- develop relationships with families and other youth workers who support young learners of sports in other activities in their everyday life.

An inclusive instructor, therefore, needs to be able to wear different hats, sometimes a psychologist, sometimes a tutor, or a learning assistant, however always providing a role model for learners of sport. Young people need people they can aspire to be like, in whom they can believe, and in whom they see themselves.

To become an inclusive instructor as described above, staff need to be inter-

ested in learning and to:

- acquire basic emotional awareness and management skills.
- acquire basic cultural and religious awareness skills.
- reflect on how to see and understand the signs that learners are experiencing difficulties.
- develop empathy so that learners feel comfortable discussing personal problems with them, should they feel the need to do so.
- find solutions to prevent minor misunderstandings creating irreparable breakdowns in communication.
- encourage learners to talk about difficulties they are going through to help them recognize the circumstances, focus on them, and deal with them.
- facilitate the integration of young people from other cultures, who may also have difficulty communicating as speakers of other languages.
- develop the ability to understand the needs of young people with visible and invisible disabilities to find suitable ways of making them feel included.
- improve their expression and communication skills using suitable methods and appropriate language that will not offend anyone, even unintentionally (focusing on their choice of words and the use of comparisons and similes, and always bearing in mind that groups are often multi-ethnic).

How can we achieve these goals? Some suggestions for instructors and staff.

- When a potential new learner enquires about activities, staff could highlight the fact that - aside from the sports teachings - there will also be time (before, during, or after lessons) for discussion. This time can be spent exploring situations that may emerge during the activities or items of news that are in some way linked to or whose discussion could be useful to the sport in question.
- If there are newcomers to the lesson, before starting, instructors should introduce them and allow time for the other members of the group to introduce themselves.

- If there are newcomers for several lessons in a row and the instructor is working with other learners, the instructor could ask the older members of the group to welcome the new learners, until there is time to introduce the newcomers to the whole group.
- Before starting a lesson, instructors should always ask learners how they feel and/or what mood they are in. They should remind learners that everyone has good and bad days and that by making their teammates aware of this, they can help prevent misunderstandings arising during training.
- An instructor should gauge the group's mood and energy and base the lesson accordingly.
- An instructor should create opportunities to get to know their learners better (through specific activities or through discussions)
- Instructors can invite older members of the group to ensure newcomers are also involved in social activities arranged outside the club.
- An instructor should urge both other staff members and older group members to report any problems they become aware of. This is not "snitching" but rather working together to help the group find effective solutions that are often hard to see alone.
- To create a climate of peace and participation, instructors could provide playful team warm-up activities that encourage dialogue and mutual understanding.
- An instructor can instill a sense of belonging in learners through a sports strip or accessories (this could even be simply a t-shirt, wristband, a badge to sew onto a tracksuit, etc., which make them feel part of the group).
- Instructors should give all learners the same attention regardless of how they perform. First of all, this boosts the abilities of the individual members of the group and secondly, it prevents splintering within the group.
- An instructor can remind the older or more talented learners not to try to stand out at all costs by outperforming their teammates during sports activities. Competition must be a healthy stimulus and should not create awkwardness among group members
- Instructors should not take it for granted that because something has been said it has been learned; they must be patient and repeat concepts

and notions that are deemed important.

- An instructor should try various communication methods to convey the same concepts, making sure that everyone has understood.
- Instructors should always leave time at the end of the lesson for feedback from the group on the lesson just finished, endeavoring to deal with any misunderstandings by nipping them in the bud.
- An instructor should try to identify the areas and aspects in which the group members are similar and use them to foster understanding and empathy among them.

What can the club do to help its staff become more inclusive and develop the necessary skills?

- There are numerous things we could suggest here but we feel that the most useful to include are those activities implemented by the project partners that contributed positively to achieving these goals. For example:
- Organize seminars and training activities for staff followed by opportunities for discussion with experts in the following areas:
 - o Effective communication and alternative communication methods.
 - o Ability to listen and see beyond words.
 - o Visible and invisible disabilities.
 - o Practices and customs of other cultures.
 - o Kinds of relationships based on age groups.
- Organize training meetups with other clubs that play either the same or different sports to create opportunities for socialization both within your own group and with members of other groups.
- Organize seminars and training sessions on topics common to the entire sporting world and also connected to participants' daily lives, such as:
 - o First aid courses
 - o Sports nutrition seminars
 - o Seminars on the consequences of use and abuse of endocrine-disrupting substances/drugs

- Inform staff about training and refresher courses organized by national and regional federations and facilitate their attendance.
- Encourage staff to participate in international projects offering the opportunity to meet and talk with other instructors, develop soft skills, and explore different teaching methods.

Being inclusive means making everyone feel part of the group.

When instructors focus on inclusion, they must draw their minds away from the sport they are teaching and concentrate on the particularities and needs of each student. Inclusion is not the same as integration. Integration means bringing someone from the outside into the mass that makes up society.

Inclusion means valuing the characteristics of an individual within a group and enabling that person to maintain their identity.

There are no specific courses for inclusive sports, but there are training courses that can teach aspects relevant to inclusion, such as raising awareness of how people react to traumas, communication, or fundraising courses.

During these training courses, instructors can learn how to recognize the traits of individuals in their groups and acquire awareness of the characteristics that hold them back, that stop them from experiencing the sporting environment fully and satisfactorily.

Inclusion activities

The following chapter aims to provide concrete examples of how to create inclusive environments in your sports programs.

The activities can be used as they are or adjusted to the needs of each group of participants. Furthermore, even though they were designed for martial arts, they can be adapted to most other sports.

We are confident that the coaches can find inspiration and create related activities that fit their needs. Being a coach often requires finding creative solutions.

An important element of each activity is the debrief. Because debriefing is usually less engaging, it can be tempting to skip it. However, it plays an important role for both the trainers and the participants – for the participants to reflect on what they have learned and understand others' needs and for the trainer to know the participants beyond their physical capabilities.

Ultimately, the goal is to ensure everyone has a chance to enjoy the benefits of sport.

NAME REEL

Use: Ensuring everyone knows each other's names while also exercising.

Number of participants: 12+

Age group: 3 years+

Duration: 15 minutes

Instructions

It sometimes happens that participants come, train, and then leave, only interacting with just a few other participants. Knowing the other participants' names is an important first step towards inclusion.

(Optional) Each participant can say their name, one by one, for the rest of the group to hear.

Split the group into two equal teams. The first team will form a circle, facing outward. The second team will create a larger circle around the first circle, facing the other team. Each member of Team One will have a member of Team Two in front of them.

Participants must say the name of the colleague they are facing. If they don't know their name, they will perform five squats, after which the colleagues will introduce themselves.

The outer circle will rotate to the right, facing the next person, until a full turn is completed or until they have all learned the names of their colleagues.

At the end, participants will introduce themselves to those from their team whose names they haven't learned.

Tips and Traps

Create a fun and relaxed atmosphere to facilitate learning and connection. Avoid negative feelings such as shame for not knowing the other participants'

names.

Variations

If the number of participants is odd, one team may have an extra player. They'll wait one turn before the circle moves.

Debrief

At the end of the activity, have a group discussion emphasizing that the stronger the team bond, the better individual progress. Emphasize the need for interaction with everyone to foster these bonds.

MARTIAL ARTS VS. STREET FIGHTING

Use: Create and enforce inclusive gym policies. Emphasize the importance of rules in sports, gym, society, and our personal life. Teach responsibility. Set personal boundaries.

Not suited for: Non-martial arts coaches

Age group: 7 years+

Materials: Flipchart (optional)

Duration: 40 minutes

Instructions

For this activity, your role as a coach will be to facilitate discussions on the topic of rules, beginning with the distinctions between martial arts and street fighting. The activity will be divided into two stages.

STAGE 1 – Understanding the importance of rules.

Ask the participants the following questions:

1. What is the main difference between martial arts and street fighting?

After collecting some answers, explain that most martial arts are a sport, and sport implies having rules. For instance, in a martial arts competition, actions such as hitting below the belt, headbutting, biting, or poking someone's eye are not allowed.

Without common rules, we would not have sports or games. We would have chaos. Appreciating and participating in sports or games also implies liking rules.

2. But what about a street fight? Are there rules in a street fight?

Emphasize that primary goal should be to avoid conflict altogether. Yet, some conflicts may be unavoidable. Martial arts techniques can serve as a means of self-defense in a street fight scenario.

However, it's important to understand that being involved in a street fight

doesn't mean that there are no consequences or rules. If you harm someone in a street conflict, you will still be held accountable by the law.

Our society is built upon a multitude of rules, ranging from legal statutes to personal codes of conduct. These rules dictate both what we do, or don't do, with rigorosity.

3. What are your personal rules?

Ask the participants to move around, pair up with others, and share a personal rule along with the reason why they follow that rule.

Before beginning, provide some examples of personal rules. Here are some suggestions:

- I always make sure to have proper hydration after training.
- I never enter the house with shoes on.
- I never drink coffee after 5 p.m.

Ask the participants to switch partners a few times. With each change, discuss a different rule. Allow enough time for both participants to share their rules and reason.

STAGE 2 – Creating common rules in the gym.

Treat the gym as a micro-society. There is a positive correlation between adherence to rules and the success of a society.⁵³ The greater the level of participation in rule-making process and the clearer the rules, the higher the chances for people to abide by the rules.⁵⁴

Involve the participants in creating common rules for the gym. Explain why it's important for everyone to feel welcome and safe.

To facilitate the conversation, you can use the following questions:

- What don't you like about what is currently happening in the gym?
- Have you ever experienced situations where someone else's behavior affected your workout?
- How can the others contribute to creating a more positive and productive environment?
- Thinking about the challenges we mentioned, what specific rules could help avoid those situations?
- How can we ensure the rules we set are clear and easy to understand?

Tips and Traps

Adapt your language to the participants' age. Let them discuss. Remember, your role is to facilitate the conversation and not to provide all the answers.

Use an open setup, such as sitting in a circle to have the conversation.

For Stage 2, prepare in advance a set of rules to suggest. Also offer a way for the participants to give you anonymous feedback.

Debrief

At the end of the activity, summarize the rules that were created. Write the rules and communicate them clearly. Ask the participants what are the best ways to ensure that everyone is aware and follows the new rules. Revisit the rules with the participants annually or whenever necessary.

UP AND POP

Use: Facilitate personal discussions between the participants. Develop attention and coordination. Exercise martial arts strikes.

Number of participants: 4+

Not suited for: People with visual disabilities

Age group: 5 years+

Materials: Balloons

Duration: 15 minutes

Instructions

Prepare small pieces of paper with questions. See below for suggestions. Insert the question into the balloons and then inflate a number of balloons equal to or greater than the number of teams.

Make teams of two people. Two teams will compete against each other and must keep the balloon in the air at all times using martial arts striking techniques.

Level 1: The participants can use both kicks and punches to maintain the balloon in the air.

Level 2: The participants can only use punches to maintain the balloon in the air.

Level 3: The participants can only use kicks to maintain the balloon in the air.

If the balloon touches the ground, or one of the players hits the balloon with an illegal technique or with an area of the body not allowed, it will result in a penalty of 30 squats for the losing team. Additionally, the losing team will have to pop the balloon and answer the question inside.

You can repeat the game with a different question.

Question suggestions:

- Have you ever been bullied, or have you ever bullied someone? What happened?
- When was the last time you were sad, and why?
- What would you like to change about yourself?
- When was the last time you helped someone outside of your family? What happened?

Feel free to add your questions adapted to the specifics of the group.

Tips and Traps

Warn the players to be careful not to use uncontrolled strikes and to pay attention to the distance between players. Try to have balanced teams to make the game competitive.

It might be useful to go around the teams to encourage conversation and give ideas. If the group is not yet bound, it is important to create a safe space first. Start with lighter questions until the group warms up, and then move towards more personal questions.

Variations

The number of players in each team and the number of balloons in the air at once can be adjusted according to your needs. Furthermore, you can adapt the activity for different disabilities, limiting the area of play.

If you want to preserve the balloons, you can use a box from which the teams can extract the questions.

If you feel the group is creative enough, let the winners ask the questions. If you really like chaos, add multiple teams with multiple balloons of different colors at the same time.

Debrief

At the end of the activity, have a group discussion with the participants. Explain the purpose of the game. Ask them what they have learned, how they felt, or if they would change anything about the game.

BLIND RESCUE

Use: Teambuilding. Develop trust, communication, and orientation skills. Develop a better understanding of the needs and struggles of people with visual impairments. Get to know each other. Facilitate discussions between the participants.

Number of participants: 10+

Not suited for: People with hearing impairments. Depending on the setup of the obstacle course, it can be difficult for people with motor difficulties.

Age group: 10 years+

Materials: Blindfolds, chalk, and obstacles (training marker cones, punching bags, rope, punch mitts, chairs, etc.)

Duration: 20 minutes

Instructions

Prepare an obstacle course using the suggested materials. You can add obstacles that must be stepped over or passed under, moving obstacles, curves, and striking exercises along the way.

Create teams of 5-6 participants. Each team will consist of 3-4 rescuers, one guide, and one victim.

The role of the rescuers is to cross the obstacle course according to the guide's indications, recover the victim, and carry it to the start/finish. The rescuers are blindfolded and must not touch the obstacles or deviate from the route. Each mistake will be penalized at the end with five squats for the whole team.

The role of the guide is to stay at the start point and guide the participants verbally. They will also count the team's mistakes.

The victim will remain inert and not help or interact with the rescuers.

It's up to each team to designate the roles within the team and to prepare a strategy.

For increased competitiveness, two teams will race against each other at the

same time on identical tracks. Furthermore, you can time the course completion. The teams with the highest times will be penalized with extra squats or other physical exercises.

Tips and Traps

Warn the players to pay attention to the guide's directions. Make sure the rescuers know how to carry the victim without hurting themselves. Adjust the difficulty according to the participants' needs. The layout of the obstacles and the complexity of the course remain at your creativity.

Variations

If there are not enough participants, you can use a punching bag or another object instead of a human victim.

The game can also be played in teams of 2 and without any victims. One person will be 'the guide' and the other 'the guided'. At the end of the race, they can switch roles, as in a relay race, to compete against other teams.

Debrief

At the end of the activity, have a group discussion with the participants. Put accent on how the communication and collaboration inside the team were. Ask them how they decided on their roles and strategy, and what they would improve. Finally, draw attention to people with visual disabilities for whom every day is an obstacle race. Emphasize the need to free up space and maintain order inside and outside the gym.

COPYCAT

Use: Teach participants to pay attention to others.

Number of participants: 6+

Not suited for: Beginners. People with visual disabilities.

Age group: 10 years+

Materials: Specific equipment for the practiced sport.

Duration: 20 minutes

Instructions

Each participant has recurrent behavior traits while playing their favorite sports. Maybe it's something that should be improved, such as lowering the left hand when punching with the right, or unique personal quirks, like keeping the head slightly tilted to one side while fighting.

Ask the participants to select a colleague to study. They should focus on observing their mistakes, repeated movements, or personal quirks. Each participant will study only one colleague at a time without disclosing their identity.

Pair participants together and ask them to exaggerate what they've learned from their observation in light sparring while the others watch. The others will then try to guess who they are imitating.

At the end, the 'copycats' will approach their chosen participant, share their observations, and provide improvement advice if necessary.

Tips and Traps

Everyone needs to have a clear understanding of their task. Examples of recurring behavior traits in famous athletes can clarify expectations.

Personal specifics will be exaggerated but not in an offensive manner.

The activity might not be suited for most beginners. Since they have not yet mastered the sport, it will be more difficult for them to observe and replicate

these specific traits.

Variations

The Copycat Game can be adapted to non-fighting sports. Instead of sparring, just play the game in a way that can be observed by the others.

Debrief

At the end of the activity, have a group discussion. Put the accent on the following:

- The importance of observing their opponents to gain game advantages.
- The importance of observing their colleagues to improve each other's technique.
- The importance of observation in general, whether to replicate wanted behaviors, prevent undesired actions, or recognize other's feelings. Encourage participants to train their observational skills, not only in sports but also in various aspects of life for personal growth and development.

WARM-UP BINGO

Use: Team building. Develop motor skills.

Number of participants: 2-20

Not suited for: People with visual disabilities. At least one player per team (team leader) must be able to see.

Age group: 4 years+

Materials: 6 cones, 2 hoops, 12 action cards (blank sheets with descriptions or drawings of the activities to complete. If there are any players who do not speak the local language, drawings are recommended), 2 sheets of A4 paper, 2 pens

Duration: 20 minutes

Instructions

The aim of warm-up bingo is to create a playful, happy atmosphere among learners before they do any physical activities, with the greater aim being to foster team spirit. Because of this, the activities, which are mostly physical, do not need to be passed. They just must be completed. Each player is asked to do their best. This way, even the less fit or less experienced players will not feel uncomfortable or blamed for how their team performs.

The game also requires good coordination and distance-judgment skills to get the hoops over the cones.

Place the cones on the ground at different distances and label them 1 to 6. Draw a grid on the A4 sheets, numbering the squares from 1 to 6 (Bingo card). Alternatively, you can print out cards as in the example provided below.

Split the players into two teams. Each team selects a team leader.

One player from each team, positioned two meters from the nearest cone, takes turns with the other team to throw a hoop over one of the cones.

If a player hoops the cone, their team can cross out the number of the hooped cone on the bingo card.

The team leader picks a card from the pile of action cards. The activity on the card picked must be completed by the opposing team.

If the hoop does not fall over a cone or does fall on a cone that has already been hooped, the throwing team must do an activity. In this case, the action card will be picked by the non-throwing team leader.

At the end of each action, the other team will be throwing the hoop.

The team that completes all six squares (“Bingo!”), or the highest number of squares, within the allotted time limit wins. If the two teams have completed the same number of squares when the time is up, the match can end in a draw.

Examples of action cards:

- Do 10 sit-ups.
- Run two laps of the gym.
- Do push-ups for one minute.
- Do 20 push-ups.
- Try to score a basket.
- Throw air punches for one minute.
- Do as many roundhouse kicks in the air as possible in one minute.

Example of Bingo Card:

1	2	3
4	5	6

Tips and Traps

Create action cards with activities of different difficulty levels based on the players’ age and abilities.

If there are any players with motor disabilities, you should prepare a group of suitable activities based on their motor skills.

We recommend you encourage players to cheer on their teammates while they are playing. Players must not be allowed to insult or put down players from other teams.

Variations

The difficulty level can be increased by moving the cones further away or by placing them at different heights if the setting allows this.

If any players are blind or have impaired vision, the blind player can be replaced by a teammate when it is time to throw the hoop, or the player with impaired vision can be helped to throw the hoop by a teammate, who will provide them with verbal instructions as to how to throw.

If you don't have any cones and hoops, you can use six-sided dice. If the number rolled is for a square that has already been crossed off, it becomes the next team's turn.

If there are players with motor disabilities for whom the instructor is unable to provide feasible physical activities, they can add a list of cards with questions related to the sport played by the group. This way, learners with motor disabilities can also play the game. This tip only applies if the players speak the local language.

Debrief

At the end of the game, the instructors and players will discuss how it went. You should explain the aim of the game and check that everyone understands.

Ask what they learned, how they felt, and whether they would change anything about the game. If you notice that the players are over-excited, get them to do some stretching or breathing exercises during the discussion to calm them down.

WRESTLING RUGBY

Use: Work on understanding rules and instructions. Learn to be a team player. Get to know your body. Learn to control your strength.

Number of participants: 6-20 (depending on available space)

Not suited for: People with visual disabilities. Can be adapted for people with motor difficulties affecting their lower limbs. See variations.

Age group: 6 years+

Materials: A tatami mat (or an empty space or lawn where you can crawl safely), 1 ball

Duration: 20 minutes (adjustable)

Instructions

The game brings together the fundamentals of rugby and wrestling and is designed to allow players to gain a better understanding of their bodies and learn to control their strength.

Before starting, make sure the playing area is clean and that nothing is lying around that could hurt anyone's hands or knees as players will be crawling.

Divide the players into two teams and divide the playing area into two equal spaces.

The game takes place on the ground.

Place a ball in the center of the playing area. Each team will have to pass the ball among themselves at least three times before they can try to score a try.

The ball needs to stay on the ground all the time. It can't be thrown, only rolled from one person to another.

The participants can move around by crawling, rolling, or doing somersaults. They cannot stand up.

The players have to reach the goal line in the opposing team's half and score a try by placing the ball behind the goal line with their hands. If the ball rolls to the goal line without someone touching it with either of their hands, no try is

scored, and the ball gets placed back in the center.

If the ball is pushed out of play, it is considered an “Out” and goes to the opposing team, starting at the point of exit.

The opposing team can gain possession of the ball by tackling, holding, or wrestling for the ball. When wrestling for the ball, only pulling and pushing are allowed. Punching or kicking are not allowed.

The player with the ball has to keep moving around the playing field and can be tackled by no more than two opponents at the same time. If a scrum with more than three people is created (i.e. one holding player + two opponents), the game is stopped. The team holding the ball restarts in the spot where play was interrupted.

Players can help their teammate who possesses the ball by marking or wrestling with the opponents so that the person holding the ball can both move and pass the ball more easily.

The players must be careful not to hurt each other and not use excessive strength.

The game ends when one of the two teams reaches the number of tries decided at the beginning (for example, five tries) or whichever team reaches the highest number of tries within a given time.

Tips and Traps

It is important to remind players that it is a team game and everyone must work together.

The coach will act as referee and have to check that the rules are obeyed, in particular, that whoever is holding the ball does not move standing up and that no more than two opponents tackle them. It can happen that whoever has the ball finds himself with all the players (opponents and teammates) on top of them in a kind of free-for-all.

Advise players to tackle opponents early, to keep them wrestling, and to free up the playing field so that the player holding the ball can pass it.

Make sure the ball is passed at least three times before reaching the goal line, otherwise the try is not valid.

Variations

Once the players are better at the game, you can change the “maximum two players tackling at a time” rule to three or four players. It will put more pressure on those holding the ball - finding themselves facing multiple opponents at the same time and will have to devise different strategies to reach the goal line.

If the game does not go forward because neither team manages to make three passes, you can remove this rule by suggesting that only one player tries to reach the goal line while their teammates work together to hold off the opponents and create a safe route to the goal line.

If there are players with motor difficulties affecting their lower body, players can be asked to move by either rolling or pulling themselves with their arms only. Alternatively, players can sit on the playing field, and the ball can be rolled from one teammate to another, trying to prevent the opposing team from intercepting it. While seated in their chosen spot, each player can move their upper body and arms to try to catch the ball.

Debrief

At the end of the game, the instructors and players will discuss and analyze the strategies used. Try to help them recognize their strengths and weaknesses based on what emerged during the activity.

This game can often end up with players becoming aggressive and concentrating more on wrestling than following the rules. When a player is tackled by one or more opponents, they experience different emotions. It can be important to analyze what they felt, physically and emotionally, during the different stages of the game.

Ask players if they were aware of how much force they were using and whether it depended on the opponent they were facing.

FOUR CORNERS RACE

Use: Warm-up. Develop leadership. Develop speed and motor skills.

Number of participants: 9+ (preferably in multipliers of three)

Not suited for: People for people with motor difficulties affecting their upper and lower limbs.

Age group: 4 years+

Materials: 3 tennis balls, 7 cones, 1 stopwatch, 4 sets of bibs (optional)

Duration: 20 minutes (adjustable)

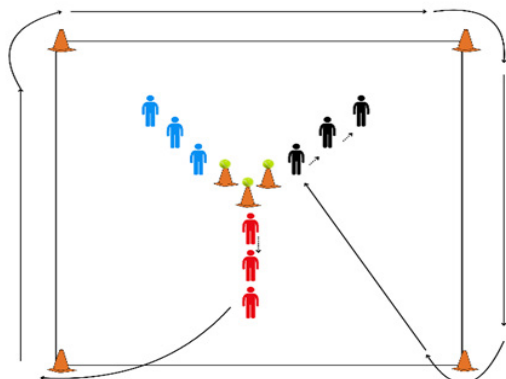
Instructions

Split the players into three teams.

Players must line up behind a cone. See diagram.

At the signal, the first player in each team takes the tennis ball and passes it, in a specific way decided by the coach, to the player behind them, and so on, until the ball reaches the last player in the line.

As soon as the last player receives the ball, they take the ball and run clockwise around the other teams (around the outside of the cones forming the square) until they reach the beginning of the team line immediately to their right (for example on the diagram, the red player stops at the front of the red team).



Once they are at the head of this new line, they pass the ball to the player behind them. The game continues until all the players have run around the four corners, and their entire team has changed position. Each team will find themselves in the line positioned to the right of the line they started in, and the round is complete.

The coach decides how many rounds the game will last and how the players must pass the ball each new round. For example:

- In the first round, they can pass it through their legs.
- In the second round, they can pass it over their heads.
- In the third round, they can pass it by twisting to the right.
- In the fourth round, they can pass it by twisting to the left.

Before starting, do a couple of tests to make sure the participants understand the game.

Once the ball passing rules are clear, add extra rules on how the players can move when running around the square, such as:

- The player running around the square has to hop all the way around.
- The player running around the square cannot use their hands (so they will have to find an alternative way to carry the ball).
- The player running around the square has to keep their arms and hands behind their back.
- The player running around the square has to run blindfolded, guided by their teammates, who can only shout their instructions.

Once everyone understands all the rules for the session, time each team. More laps can be added to each session. The teams are encouraged to improve and beat earlier times.

Tips and Traps

The instructors will act as referees and will make sure the rules are obeyed, especially if the players are young. It may be useful to help the younger participants, who might find it hard to understand the instructions given.

Variations

The running part of the game can also include sport-specific exercises. For example, every time a player reaches a cone, they must do ten front kicks, throw five hooks, do two cartwheels, etc.

If there are any visually impaired players in the group, a teammate could accompany them during the running, or all the players could be blindfolded so that they will all be equally “abled”.

An extra round in which the ball must be carried on top of an overturned plastic or paper cup can be added. If the ball falls off, the player has to return to their starting point. This way, the impact of the players who can run fast is reduced because the lap around the square becomes a lap based on their ability not to drop the ball rather than just running speed.

Debrief

At the end of the game, the trainers and players will discuss and analyze the strategies used. Try to help them recognize their strengths and weaknesses based on what emerged during the activity.

Throughout the game, some players will be faster than others, which can become stressful for slower runners. They may feel it is their fault if their team comes last. Examine these emotions with the group and discuss how to deal with them positively.

RELAY OF FORTUNE

Use: Warm-up. Develop speed and motor skills..

Number of participants: 4-40

Not suited for: People with motor issues or bone or muscle fragility. Can be adapted for people with visual impairments. See variations.

Age group: 5 years+

Materials: 100 printouts/drawings divided into 25 circles, 25 squares, 25 diamonds, 25 triangles (The papers must be folded in four so its content can't be seen.), 4 printed flags featuring either a circle, a square, a diamond, or a triangle (the team flags), 1 large container (this can be a cone placed upside down, a shoe box, or similar)

Duration: 15 minutes

Instructions

This game creates a competition between teams where winning or losing depends mainly on luck rather than the skills of the individual team members. Therefore, everyone can give their best without feeling it's their fault if they lose.

The aim of the game is to collect the highest number of cards with the team's symbol on them. The team that collects the most cards with the symbol on their flag wins.

Place the printouts/drawings inside the container, then position the container in the middle of the playing area.

Divide the players into teams (from two to four teams, depending on the number of players) and have the teams select a leader.

Each team leader picks a flag (sheet with a symbol). The symbol on the flag must be kept secret from all the players. The flag is placed on the ground, face down, behind each team. Nobody, including the team leaders, must know their team's symbol until the end of the game.

The teams position themselves five to ten meters away from the container,

depending on the available space. Each team sets its flag down and creates its own “home base”. The positioning of the teams will be one in front of the other if there are two teams, in a triangle if there are three teams, or at the corners of a square if there are four teams. The container will be placed in the middle at the same distance from each team.

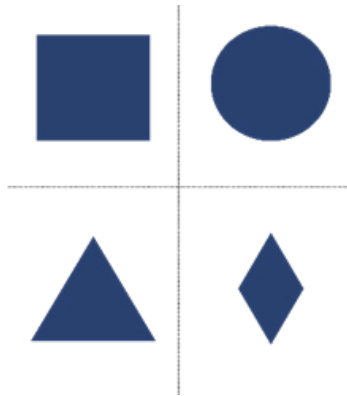
At the start, one member of each team crawls to the container, picks out a printout/drawing, and takes it to their home base. Then another teammate does the same, in the form of a relay.

At the end of the game, all the printouts/drawings inside the container will be spread among teams. Each team will have a different number of printouts depending on how fast the players manage to crawl.

Each team turns over their flag to see their team symbol.

The team leaders count one point for each printout/drawing collected by their team with their symbol on it. The team that scores the most points wins.

Example of shapes for the flags and printouts:



Tips and Traps

Allow a few minutes for each team to create a strategy.

We recommend you encourage participants to cheer on their teammates while playing. Players must not be allowed to insult or put down players from other teams.

Variations

The route from the home base (starting point) to the container can be shortened or lengthened according to the players' abilities. The crawling race can be replaced by running or other ways of moving (leopard crawling, leapfrogging, backward running, etc). You can also add obstacles along the route

For players with vision impairment, the movement from the home base to the container with the printouts/drawings inside will be done in pairs (at least one sighted player per pair). Alternatively, tactile elements can be placed on the ground and used as a guide (e.g. rubber strips or ropes that they can use to feel their way along the route).

Debrief

At the end of the game, ask the participants what they learned, how they felt, and whether they would change anything about the game. If you notice that the players are over-excited, do stretching or breathing exercises before the discussion to calm the players down.

ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS

Use: Teambuilding. Develop collaboration.

Number of participants: 4-10 (even number of participants)

Not suited for: People with visual disabilities. At least one player per team (team leader) must be able to see

Age group: 4 years+

Materials: 6 (or more) large hoops to place on the floor, 2 different colored cones, printouts/drawings with challenges (half the size of the hoops).

Duration: 15 minutes

Instructions

The game is based partly on luck and partly on the skills of the players. It aims to encourage players to do their best in team physical activities while making them aware that whether they win or lose is also down, in part, to luck.

Place the hoops on the floor, forming a pathway.

Split the players into two teams. Give each team a cone. The cone will act as a pawn, representing the position of their team on the pathway.

The printouts/drawings with the challenges are positioned inside the hoops, starting from the first hoop and alternating one hoop with the challenge and one empty hoop. The last hoop will be empty.

The challenges can be strength- or skills-based exercises and must be completed in pairs. The trainer will choose the challenges based on the sport played by the group, the players' ages, and physical abilities. The challenges must be clear and easily understandable.

The teams must cross the pathway, completing the challenges along the way and reaching the end.

The two teams stand in two rows facing each other. Each person forms a pair with the person standing in front of them, and then each pair plays rock, paper,

scissors (rock beats scissors, paper beats rock, scissors beat paper).

Each individual win equals a point for the team. The team with the most points moves their cone forward one hoop while the other team remains in place.

In case of a tie, a second round is played. If there is a tie for three rounds in a row, each team will move forward by one hoop.

When a team moves forward and lands on a hoop with a challenge, the whole team must work together to complete the task. If the team completes the challenge, it can move its cone to the next hoop (which will be empty). If the team does not complete the challenge, the team will stay in place. They can retry the challenge the next time they win a round of rock, paper, scissors.

Once the challenge is attempted, the teams play another round of rock, paper, scissors and proceed as explained above.

The team that gets out of the pathway wins.

Example of activities:

- Dribbling the ball as in basketball: make the ball bounce ten times without dropping it.
- Within an allotted time, throw at least 15 roundhouse kicks at one of your teammates, who will have to duck and dodge the kicks.
- Working in pairs with a teammate, cross the gym holding a ball between your backs and without dropping it.
- Working in pairs with a teammate, cross the gym as human wheelbarrows.

Tips and Traps

We recommend you encourage players to cheer on their teammates while playing. Trainers will help improve communication between team members.

Select challenging yet achievable activities.

Remind players that they must work together, discover each other's best qualities, and make the most of them.

Variations

For a longer game, you can add more hoops and challenges.

If you don't have hoops and cones for the pathway, you can divide the challenges into two piles. Every time a team wins at rock, scissors, paper round, they draw a challenge card.

The activities do not necessarily need to have an outcome. They could be physical or skills-based exercises. In this case, the challenge will always be considered completed.

Debrief

At the end of the game, the trainers and the participants discuss and analyze the strategies used. Help them recognize their strengths and weaknesses and find a way to help their teammates improve.

At the end, the players congratulate each other. Instructors will ask participants what they thought of the activity and how they felt.

Success stories

Upon encountering a title like this, most people would probably expect to find stories of adventures, of experiences beyond the believable. However, a success story is, more often than not, made by ordinary people with a plan and determination. It is a pathway or a series of events that lead to achievements. Success means attributing worth to this achievement based on how much it is appreciated or acknowledged by others.

The word ‘success’ has its roots in the Latin word ‘successum’, meaning event, reminding us that the starting point of a success story is a neutral element, something that has happened.

We often read articles or listen to accounts of success stories and are captivated because they resemble a fairy tale. A story, especially a success story, must never be escapist. It must share something real, something true. The range within which storytellers write extends from pure fact to pure fiction. And so, events are skewed and artfully constructed, flawlessly written, and sugar-coated to create stories of success. At this point, a success story becomes a successful story. Behind this simple change in the word positioning lies a shift in the approach to the story, from oriented towards describing a success to obsessively oriented towards achieving fame.

In our approach to telling these success stories, we have endeavored to keep the facts with the truth foremost in mind. They are not fictionalized. They are real stories of real people who have allowed us to make their experiences public.

In this chapter, *Il Cassetto dei Sogni* decided to bring together its stories as third-person narratives written from an organizational perspective, while Kyo-dai has chosen to present them as a first-person narrative of the protagonists that took the form of an interview.



Benjamin Adekunle Miron Adegboyi

Glory Heavyweight Grand Prix Runner-up: 2018
 Glory Heavyweight Contender Tournament Winner: 2015, 2016, 2018
 Glory Fight of the year: 2018, 2020
 Glory K.O. of the year nomination: 2018
 Glory Best New talent Runner-up: 2014

My story is a simple one. It's the story of a boy who grew up in Aiud, Alba County, born in Cluj Napoca to parents of different nationalities. My Romanian mother and Nigerian father met in Cluj during college. I lived in Nigeria for a good while, but after my parents separated, I returned to Romania.

In the '90s, right after communism, I was somewhat special. I was a boy of color in a white community in a very small town. At that time, my mom thought it would be a good idea for me to learn some self-defense, so she took me to karate. I only did it for three-four years, but I remained fond of martial arts.

Later, I had a long period of time when I no longer did any contact sports. I tried playing football (soccer), but I didn't enjoy it. I also tried basketball, which I was a bit better at, but when my parents moved out of Romania, they were hesitant to let me continue with basketball on my own. I had to move to Italy with my mother, where I briefly dabbled in boxing as well.

At 22-23 years of age, I started kickboxing, but not in a very organized manner. I had already moved to Cluj Napoca, and mostly trained with friends. We had a coach, Flaviu Moldovan, who trained in America and periodically came to the country and held training sessions for us.

The K1 events of that time had a huge influence on me. I loved watching Remy Bonjasky, Peter Aerts, and Ray Sefto. I had a friend in Cluj Napoca, and often, when the Final 16 tournaments were in Japan, I would go to his place and spend

the night. We would set our alarms to wake up at night to watch the fights on TV. All of these experiences combined made me love this sport more and more.

I've always let myself be carried by the wind, adapting to wherever life took me. I believe that's how adaptability became a part of me. I moved to Bucharest because of the sport. At the age of 26, I decided to take it more seriously. Someone who saw me in the training gym and with whom I occasionally spoke suggested that I should become a professional athlete. That's when I thought to myself, "Hey, why not? Let's give it a try. I have nothing to lose." It was like a challenge for me. Back then, there were only 2 or 3 good kickboxing gyms in the whole of Romania, and through a friend, I managed to get to one of them.

It was quite a tough journey. In the beginning, sports don't pay off. I was fortunate to have my parents, my sister, my friends... I worked, did all sorts of filming, worked as a bodyguard. I had to work during that time to support myself and train quietly. Only later I became known and started to have sponsors.

I believe that, in general, high-performance sports require a lot of sacrifices. Being away from loved ones during training camps, not going to clubs, or not attending parties as a teenager are things many people aren't willing to give up. And it shows. These things make the difference.

I've been asked if I ever wanted to quit, and I've heard this from many athletes. It never happened to me, not even when I had two or three defeats in a row. Maybe because I started late, I knew what I wanted to do. Maybe it's also a characteristic of mine to never give up. I wanted to be the only Romanian to reach this level and keep it up for the long haul. Considering that I am, I believe, the only Romanian athlete who started performance sport at the age of 26, I have managed to collect some titles in my career. I think the most important achievement is that I managed to stay in the top 10 for ten years in the best competition in the world - more precisely, seven years in 1st place, followed by three years in the top 4.

I know I have young fans, and I really want them to know that when you love something, age doesn't matter. I'm living proof. At 26, when other athletes were retiring from the sport, I just started. I'm 39 now, and this year I was in the top 10 in the world. I think I'm an example for young people, and I hope to be followed.

Sport has changed my life. It balanced me, disciplined me, and molded me

into the person I am today. As a young boy away from my parents, there were many moments when I could have taken a wrong turn.

Now I have a son, and I'm more attentive. When he was born, it was the happiest moment of my life. I realized that I had moved up to another level. Both, my wife and I try to instill in him the importance of being kind and fair and to have principles. If you are able to convey this to the people you work with, in any field, I believe you will succeed in life.

Sure, it's not easy. I've had moments when I stepped into the ring with great confidence and moments when I got in with doubt and with the fear of disappointment. It's a mix of feelings, but most of the time, obviously, I've had a winning mentality, a joy to perform, and an eagerness to show the world what I've learned along the way. When you enter the ring, you have to be a fighting machine. Out on the street, I'm a different person - a family man, calm, hard to anger, gentle, emotional. My friends sometimes tell me I should be meaner, but I think this is just who I am.

The pressure and fear of disappointment have increased as I climbed the ranks. I believe it comes from our culture. As Romanians, we care a lot about what people say. I've had the opportunity to work with many athletes and coaches from different parts of the world, and I've noticed that only we are so interested in what others say, in what happens, and in how people perceive us. I always think about what they say, how they look at me, and what others think of me. It probably comes from my childhood because I was different. When I was little, there were episodes of discrimination and meanness. And even now, as an adult, I still encounter unwarranted hate based on my skin color or nationality. It doesn't affect me anymore. Probably because I'm mature now, and I understand. However, when I was younger, I was upset when I was called "Crow," "Blackie," or told "Get out of here!". Maybe we should focus more on ourselves.

In a way, I could say that being different, being a black boy in a predominantly white area, was an advantage. I couldn't say if it's the same for everyone. It could also be a characteristic of mine to see the positive side. Many people wanted to be friends with me, and I would say it rather helped me.

I believe the toughest decision I'll make will be when I retire. I haven't fully made the transition from athlete to coach yet. I'd like to stay active for another

year or two. I still have a contract with the best promotion for another year and a half, and I can't say what will happen after that, if I'll sign again or not. Never say never. I feel like I still have something left in me to give.

Regarding coaching, it's quite challenging. Sometimes, I think I might be asking too much of my athletes. I compare them to myself. There's also the inability to do anything sitting on the side. As a coach, you can't get into the athlete's mind, even if you see things differently. And I realize how hard it is for the family. The emotions are greater than in my own fights. When I step into the ring, at some point, the bell rings, and the emotions disappear. I have to fight. From the side, it's a continuous emotion. You shout, but they don't hear you. You want them to do something, but they don't listen. It's very tough. There's a lot of frustration.

There's also a bit of pressure from the parents, but I always try to say that it's not up to me. It's up to the athletes. Obviously, it also depends on me, maybe 10%, 20%, let's say up to 40%. It depends on what I teach and the mentality and seriousness I can instill. But for the most part, it's up to them. You are the only one who can make yourself a champion. No one else can.

I believe that we, as coaches, should strive to be better people, as everything starts from there. We shouldn't focus so much on the material aspect and should be more open-minded. When you love something and do it with pleasure, you don't expect something material in return. If you manage to be a better person, more forgiving, and more understanding, material success will surely follow.

I believe everyone sees success differently. Some people focus on material things, while others look for happiness. For me, it's a mix. I don't think one can exist without the other. You can be happy and healthy with a beautiful family, but if you lack material necessities, something feels incomplete. Or you can have everything you want, but if you're not happy or healthy, again, it doesn't work. It's all about finding balance.

I run an academy, and I try to balance the kids, to discipline them, and when I say discipline, I mean real discipline. I care a lot about this, and I have some well-established rules. I believe being punctual, respecting your peers and the coach, and knowing how to listen will help you along the way.

Andreea Chițu

World championship: Silver (2014; 2015), Bronze (2011)
European championship: Gold (2012), Silver (2013; 2020), Bronze: (2014; 2016)
Olympic Games: 7th (2016)

I've been involved in sports my whole life. My parents took me to gymnastics when I was three years old because it was the time of Nadia Comăneci. I think that most girls back then went to gymnastics, and I was no exception. I enjoyed it, but for some reason that I can't quite recall I eventually quit. Then, I dabbled with handball for a bit, and at the age of 9, some judo coaches came to our school to scout for potential athletes. I went out of curiosity mostly. I think what fascinated us more was the idea of fighting. It lasted almost all my school years. At first, it seemed fun because we played a lot. We had a very large hall with tatami mats, trellis, ropes, and balls. So I stayed for a long time, playing and learning judo at the same time.

I didn't realize I was excelling. I became national champion in my age group after training in judo for about 3 or 4 years. After that championship, a coach from the national center in Cluj came and asked me if I wanted to train for high performance in an organized setting.

I'm not sure what discussions my parents had back then. I think it was a difficult decision for them to let me leave at the age of 14. I didn't realize the significance of it either. I was just happy that I was given the opportunity to pursue sports in a much more serious way.

This is how I left for Cluj at the age of 14. The first year was quite challenging. I had moved away from my mom, who used to do absolutely everything for me, and when I got there, I had to learn to clean my room and my closet, wash

my clothes, and take care of myself. I think that was the biggest challenge. Plus, I was surrounded by strangers, and the training sessions were much more demanding. But gradually, with the help of people and family, I managed to adapt and stay there for 20-something years.

Back when I left, there were no cell phones. I remember that almost every evening, at a set time after practice, I would go to a pay phone and wait for it to ring. That's how we talked. My parents had no idea what high-performance sports were all about, but probably through discussions with the coaches and the coaches telling them, "She has potential," "She has qualities," they weighed it up – They must have weighed the pros and cons: 'Should we support her in sports or should we bring her home because it's hard for her and hard for us?' In the end, they made the tough decision to let me go live with strangers.

Now that I'm starting to understand what it means to be a parent, I realize they had a tough decision to make. Letting your 14-year-old daughter move 500 kilometers away. Not being able to see her whenever you wanted. Not being able to have her home for weekends and only being able to speak to her once a day on a pay phone. It must have been a real pain. I was a bit selfish because all I could think of was my performance. Only years later, my mom told me she couldn't stop crying the day I left. We all made sacrifices for my performance.

Nowadays, I think it is easier to stay in touch with your kid, but I believe it is harder to convince them that certain sacrifices are worth it. Back in my day, there were also girls who, from time to time, would call their parents and tell them to come and take them home. The parents would come, talk to them, encourage them, and eventually, the girls would stay.

It was tough. You were surrounded by girls who all wanted the same thing – to excel. There were about 30-40 of us in the dormitory. We shared rooms with 3-4 other girls. Inevitably, there were conflicts among us. I guess that was one of the reasons you wanted to go home. At home, there was no conflict, no fighting for a spot in competitions, no cleaning. Plus, there were the coaches who always pushed you and sometimes yelled. At home, Mom and Dad never yelled. In a way, it was the survival of the fittest. Each of us found our own way to cope and motivate ourselves, and we all eventually understood why we were there and what we needed to do. We went on like that, with everything. With school. With

sports. With homesickness.

At school, we went to classes on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays one week and then on Tuesdays and Thursdays the following week. We also had to go to school for tests and exams. Sometimes, we would miss school for competitions, but we would make up the work later. The teachers were generally understanding. Now, from what I hear from my athletes, most schools don't allow students to miss classes unless they attend a sports-focused school.

I managed to stay in high-performance sports for 20-something years. Everyone sees the glamorous side: the traveling, the medals, the podium. But there's a lot that goes on behind the scenes that makes it tough to make it to the top. Not just in Romania. Everywhere, people have two hands and two legs and encounter the same challenges. It doesn't matter if you're born in Germany, Italy, or anywhere else. Okay, maybe the opportunities are a bit better than in Romania, but to excel in sports, you first need the right mindset, the drive, and some people to guide you through the tough times. I think the most impactful moment was when, in 2011, I won the bronze medal at the World Championships. Then, in 2012, I won gold at the European Championships and qualified for the Olympics. It was an achievement I never even dreamed of. It came as a result of years of serious training, and it made me realize that it's worth it to keep pushing and that amazing things can happen when you least expect them.

Sports taught me that no matter how hard it gets, you have to keep going. Nothing in life is easy. Even if you think you can't take it anymore, there will be easier times ahead. Sometimes, we're encouraged to try a lot of different things, which is great, but I think it's also important to stick with something even when it gets tough. You might not like it at some point, but give it one more day. Maybe tomorrow will be different. Maybe there's a day, a month, a period where you don't even enjoy walking. But I think you should try to push past the first obstacle. Okay, if you still don't like it or think it's not for you, then you can give up, but not at the first hurdle.

Consistency is key in training. You need to stay in good physical shape and avoid having ups and downs in your preparation. I think that's the first thing any aspiring athlete should learn. I believe that consistent training over a good period of time is what leads to performance. When you get injured, you might

have to take at least two weeks off, two weeks when you can't train. Then, you have to take it easy, and for at least a month, you can't train at full capacity. It's a month that sets you back, and then you have to work hard to get back to the same level. Fortunately, I didn't have any serious injuries until I was 28. I guess I was lucky that my genetics were okay. Maybe it also helped that I grew up in the countryside and "ate dirt," which gave me good overall health. There were some minor injuries - a finger might get sprained, I might strain a muscle, or have a slight muscle fiber tear, but nothing serious.

I've always enjoyed grappling on the mat. I thrived in the fight and never accepted domination. I think I've been competitive from the start and maintained it throughout my career. Sure, you can train for it. You can lose it along the way, but I've maintained it also because of the people around me. The desire to physically and mentally dominate your opponents is an essential quality in high-performance sports, I believe. There are many times when you're not in the best physical shape, so you have to compensate mentally and find a reason to defeat your opponent. I think that's what helps you win.

Even in school, I used to get into fights with the boys. I didn't really accept their games because, in the end, they were just games. Back then, we didn't call it bullying. It was just teasing, and it didn't affect me that much. Probably because I would fight back, and even throw them sometimes. In a way, I think I was made for contact sports. Maybe it's also because I have a brother who also did judo, and we used to spar at home.

The preconception that girls should be delicate and feminine is something we learn from society. People sometimes tell me when I say I do judo, "Oh, I have to be careful what I say, or you might throw me." Yes, I could throw you, but if I practice a contact sport, I might think twice before doing it. Contact sports teach you discipline and self-control which are important for girls too. And they also teach you how to defend yourself.

I've never actually had to defend myself. It probably has something to do with my posture as well. If you see someone standing tall with a bit of attitude, you'd think twice before messing with them.

I've had to step in on a few occasions, though. For example, I was on a tram once and saw a guy trying to steal a girl's wallet. I told him to stay put because I

saw what he was up to. At first, he wanted to intimidate me with "Who are you?" and "I'll do whatever I want," and I told him, "No. You won't do whatever you want as long as I'm here." Eventually, he came towards me, and I punched him in the throat. Even though we don't focus on striking in judo, we have certain points we can target and know how to use them. Then he started screaming, saying I hit him, that I beat him up. "Get off the tram now because you were trying to steal the girl's wallet." The girl thanked me kindly. There aren't many people who step in and stop such situations. Everyone stays silent and does nothing, even if they see it. I thought it was the right thing to do.

The ratio of girls to boys in training is starting to even out now. I've never felt like being a girl in this sport means being less valued. On the contrary, in sports, results speak for themselves. I was much better than my brother, who also did judo, and I wasn't taken to fewer competitions than he was just because I was a girl. We were treated equally.

Everyone, from my parents to my teachers, encouraged me. At 18, I wanted to quit high-performance sports. It was the age when I wanted to go to the beach or the mountains with my friends. The coaches didn't say "Fine, quit.", even though I wasn't doing very well at the time. On the contrary, they called my parents, they talked to me, and explained that it was just a phase. I didn't feel that "Go home to the kitchen." thing. They said instead "Come on the mat and beat some people up."

Moreover, I think I was appreciated for working out and having a toned body and good posture. In my opinion, sports go hand in hand with femininity. On our days off, we would put on makeup and wear heels and dresses. When a female athlete enters a room, especially if she's wearing heels and a dress, you'll see heads turn. And in our gym, there are girls who initially lack confidence. After a month, two, or three, they start to change. You see them walk differently, talk differently, and look differently.

Women often ask me how they could learn to defend themselves. They're interested but lack the courage to take the first step. I tell them, "Come on in one day, call me or send me a message.", but that message never comes. I don't know what's holding them back. Perhaps it's the fear of looking ridiculous, the impression that they'll appear incompetent, but I tell them it's okay to be incompe-

tent There's also the equipment, and maybe they're thinking, "How will I look? Will I be in pajamas?". Those pajamas are the official judo uniform. We don't walk around the streets like that. In the judo gym, you're dressed appropriately. You don't come to the gym in heels. They want to learn everything very quickly, or they expect to have a certain level of fitness in a month, which is impossible. I explain to my athletes that it takes about a year to learn a technique. Patience isn't a quality that most people possess.

I think we need to encourage girls more when they're young. Family plays a crucial role. That's how it was for me. They should encourage and support you to pursue sports, not say, "Come on, dear, leave it. You go to school." One of my girls told me she doesn't want to come to judo anymore because she wants to focus on school, and her parents agree. But that girl has potential, and I think she should be encouraged more not to give up. Family is a critical factor in starting and continuing a sport. The problem is that contact sports are automatically associated with aggression, and the family isn't as insistent with girls as with boys.

I also had two attempts to quit. The first was at 18 when I wanted to have fun, and the second was because I didn't think I was good enough. There was a time when my teammates were winning medals at tournaments, and I could barely manage 7th place. So, what was I doing there? I didn't know what I know now, that you have to be consistent. For me, it was either you're good, or you're not. But I was lucky with the people around me who told me I needed to have confidence and that I had qualities. Sometimes, you see the image in the mirror distorted.

If I could turn back time, I'd probably appreciate a bit more the competitions that ended with bronze or silver because they're still medals. Or simply the fact that I managed to participate. I was often way too upset.

Now, my biggest concern is my child, that she's healthy, that nothing bad happens to her, and the values I can instill in her. I would like her to be happy, to have a life full of adventures and surrounded by movement. Through sports, you get to be part of a great group, a group with good values that encourages you to strive for self-improvement in various ways.

I have also told my girls this. Don't set limits for yourselves because you have no idea how far you can go until you try. You have to try every day, harder and

harder and harder. Limits are for people who don't have the courage or don't dare to dream and ask themselves, "How far can I go?". Let your neighbor or colleague be. How much can I push myself to become exceptional? Exceptional for myself. It doesn't matter what other people think.

Later, you also ask them for their opinion. You need people to encourage you and give you constructive criticism. Due to technology, we're losing our interaction with people. It's an essential matter. We're a social species, and we need to interact with each other. Technology overwhelms us too. Sometimes, I catch myself spending time on my phone and realize half an hour has passed. When? And I know it's hard to ask kids to use technology less because that's how they were born. We live in a society where it's everywhere, but I think that by directing them toward sports and other activities, you can avoid this over-reliance on technology.

It's important to set some limits. Now we spend an hour on the phone and then go swimming or climbing. We make a schedule. We need balance. I would love to be able to instill a mindset where they would choose an outing with friends in nature anytime over sitting on the phone at the terrace.

I'm trying to teach judo, to teach people how to overcome their limits, how to react, or to defend themselves. When I became a coach, I didn't know what to do. As an athlete, I only had to take care of myself. Now, I have to take care of a group of teenage girls. It's challenging. There are many extra things I must do, but it doesn't bother me, and I think I have to adapt very quickly. I believe athletes can adapt quickly to new situations.

I still remember the first time I walked into the dojo and stood in front of them to give the greeting. I wasn't used to someone bowing to me. I was the one bowing to Sensei. I think the hardest part was realizing that I was no longer one of them and I had to be an authority, a firm hand. To realize that I had to lead them on a journey that would make them desire performance. It's a bit harder to motivate them when they lose. What do you say? "You were good, but..."? How can they believe you? We still have ingrained in our minds that being good means winning medals. I try to explain to them now that, in fact, being good means making progress.

I think the transition from athlete to coach is still ongoing. It's a process. It's

totally different. Only now am I beginning to realize how important coaches were in my life and the battles they fought with me. I remember that when I couldn't go on anymore, I could hear their voices the loudest. It was like a boost. It gave me strength. The coach's voice and image imprint on you for life. Even now, when I coach, I think about how my coach would have handled certain situations and what he would have said. How would he have spoken? Would they have raised their voice or remained calm? And even if I hadn't performed, the coach's imprint would still have been there because willingly or not, the situations in the gym mirror the ones in real life.

M.

M., now 21 years old, was adopted when she was very young. While growing up, M. showed many signs of hyperactivity, and over time, it was confirmed that she was suffering from a cognitive delay, and she was diagnosed with autism.

We met M. at school, where, for four years, she attended the martial arts workshops Il Cassetto dei Sogni provided for the school's students with disabilities. The martial arts course aimed to teach participants to get to know their bodies and learn to control their physical strength. M. was always there, and she could never keep still. She was always moving. During the rare times when she missed a workshop, her absence was noticeable because of the silence and the almost embarrassing peacefulness.

M. would ask questions constantly. She wanted to understand everything, but when it looked like she understood the answers she'd received, she'd often start asking the same questions again. She is exhausting and stubborn but also extremely sweet, affectionate, and caring. We saw M. grow up, we saw her argue with her classmates and teachers, and we saw her become a runner.

M.'s inability to keep still created difficulties for her during lesson time, for both her teachers and her classmates. She was ALWAYS moving. Not all her teachers understood her needs, and for many, she was a thorn in their side during lessons. To help her release all that pent-up energy, her physical education teacher decided to enroll her in an interschool cross-country running competition.

M. started running, and she started winning! She had difficulty with everything, but not running! When she started running, as if by magic, she became attentive, focused, and determined, and she gave it her all. During M.'s time as a student there, the school won scores of cross-country running medals, and ev-

eryone at school knew and respected her. She was obviously happy!

During her last year of high school, M. was worried about leaving school and often talked about it during the martial arts course. What would her life be like afterward? At the moment, it was all about M., the runner who wins races for the school. But what afterward?

M. was aware of her condition. She thought long and hard about the future, about finding a boyfriend and living her life.

During one of the last lessons, M. asked for the mobile numbers of the Il Cassetto dei Sogni instructors "to keep in touch". One of her greatest fears was being alone, without friends, without anyone who remembered her.

Usually, at school, teachers or experts are not allowed to give their contact details to students who attend the activities, but we have all grown fond of her, and sometimes, you have to turn a blind eye.

That was two years ago and, now, a couple of times a month we get photos and messages from M. telling us about herself, her new part-time job at a grocery store, her new uniform, her thoughts on current events, her boyfriend who like her, goes to the athletics field every day and runs with her. Because when M. runs, she is happy.

Mario Rivoiro a.k.a Blind Reverendo

In May 2023, Il Cassetto dei Sogni took a group of young people with different types of disabilities (visual impairment, motor difficulties, slight cognitive delays, diabetes) to try an adaptive surfing experience in Cantabria, Spain.

None of them had ever surfed before. Some do indoor climbing, some martial arts, and some love walking, but none of them had ever given any thought to getting atop a surfboard and tackling a rough sea.

The group left open to new experiences and, to be honest, a bit scared. Five youngsters with disabilities, five accompanying people (ready for anything!), and three able-bodied young adults - all determined to make the most of this new and different experience.

When we arrived in Cantabria, we met the Spanish group: eight young people, including five with disabilities and three without, plus five accompanying people, one of whom was Italian and - as blind - brought his gorgeous guide dog with him.

Mario Rivoiro, with the stage name “Blind Reverendo”, was born in 1981 and lost the use of his sight as a result of congenital glaucoma at the age of eight. Although Italian, Mario has lived in Barcelona for years. He has had continuous musical training, through which he learned to sing and to play Latin and African percussion, guitar, and piano.

Mario is a living example of how to overcome obstacles through music. Using rhythms and melodies, he fuses styles like reggae, raggamuffin, and dub. He conveys his view of a world filled with challenges and how to face them. He brings together notions such as engagement, social conscience, joy, and the desire to enjoy life. His rhythmic blend of music is paired with lyrics about the passions,

emotions, and illusions of being human and conveys a strong sense of social justice and empowerment.

Mario has toured Europe with his music, performing at countless festivals and venues, and has published four works: *Letti di Note* (2008); *Voces* (Blind Luck Label, 2012) with international artists of the caliber of Macaco and Bunna from Africa Unite, an EP called *Dippin’In* (2015), and an album titled *Searching The Waves* (2019) on the heels of a single of the same name. Mario has also toured the world and explored many countries musically, including Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil, immersing himself in different musical styles that have uniquely influenced his compositions.

In his recording studio ‘Grammophonia’ in Barcelona, Mario produces for numerous artists and has been featured in various documentaries. He organizes events and has taken an active role in a series of social and musical projects, such as “Look Inside by Bus” - a tour among migrants intended to focus on the human and social side of art.

Mario has always been into sports. He started with swimming, where he reached the competition level and won the 2001 Italian championship with the FIN (Italian Swimming Federation), taking home a gold medal in breaststroke and a bronze in crawl. Alongside swimming, Mario has always done a lot of gymnastics, supported by very capable teachers who encouraged him to engage in sports from early childhood without ever stopping. Despite his blindness, Mario had sport coursing through his veins, and he loved competing.

On 22 March 2002, following a car accident that caused a multiple fracture in his upper arm and led to the implantation of a prosthesis, Mario had to leave competitive swimming. His doctors also told him he wouldn’t even be able to play music again.

After his initial reaction of confusion, anger, and despondency, Mario, who has always faced challenges with determination, decided he wasn’t having it. Music and sport were his life, and it would take more than a stupid accident to keep him away from them.

Despite all the medical advice and opinions, Mario gathered all his courage and determination and started physiotherapy and indoor climbing. He had tried rock climbing in the past, but always outdoors, and used to climb two or three

times a week, tackling particularly challenging routes. Mario had never tried it in a gym as he thought indoor climbing would be boring. In the beginning, it was a challenge but also an enjoyable discovery for him.

One step after another, Mario began to recover. He found he could move with a fair amount of agility again despite the chronic pain, which has never gone away. He also started singing again, alternating between moments of ups and downs and working around a latent depression due partly to his disability and partly to his constant physical pain.

In 2016, Mario discovered surfing, and his life changed. He found he couldn't get enough buzz from riding the waves. It's not easy to keep up on the board if you can't see what's going on, but that adrenaline rush was what he needed to make some changes. To surf better, he had to live better. He had to change his diet and start doing cardio and other kinds of workouts, as well as train with resistance bands every day. To be able to surf, Mario had to fight physical pain and nourish his soul.

With his general practitioner and a specialist in osteopathy and physiotherapy, Mario worked on his posture to minimize pain and achieve the strength, speed, power, and agility he needed to handle the waves and surf. This combination brought him well-being and a significant reduction in chronic pain.

Today, Mario has been selected for the Italian national Paralympic surfing team and has six (federation and non-federation) competitions under his belt, at which he finished 4th and 6th. He is now also an adaptive surf instructor, and when we met in Spain in May 2023, his presence was fundamental, and his teaching methods made all the difference.

He is still involved in his music projects with Grammophonia, but he is also extremely aware of how much sport has helped him tackle his difficulties. His goals now include fostering a sporting culture in others, and his recent discovery of the Erasmus+ projects and all the possibilities they offer opened up new horizons for him.

Maria Laura

Maria Laura Muratori is now a 32-year-old cheerful woman. On 25 September 2012, when she was 20, she fell victim to a road accident. The accident, in which she was innocent, happened when she was traveling to Ravenna to collect some documents from the secretarial office of the University of Bologna, where she was a student.

Maria Laura was driving on the slow lane on the motorway, on a morning in which the traffic was particularly busy as there was a major exhibition in the area. Suddenly, her car engine started to flood, leading to her car stalling. Maria Laura managed to pull over and stop on the emergency lane. While she was looking for her phone to call for help, a truck crashed into her parked car, pushing it for hundreds of meters.

Following the accident, Maria Laura went into a coma. Her parents, her younger brother, and her friends stayed at her bedside, hoping for a miracle. She woke up after 21 days, remembering nothing about what happened. She was no longer the same carefree girl as before. Apart from the numerous fractures, the entire right side of her body, from her eye to the tip of her toes, was no longer responding. It took years of physiotherapy, speech therapy, psychotherapy, and immense determination for Maria Laura to be able to get out of bed and back on her feet.

She never fully recovered, the accident leaving her with speech impediments, balance issues, difficulties in movement and coordination, and short-term memory difficulties. She sets alarms and leaves post-it notes everywhere as reminders.

Without the support of her family and friends, she would never have made it. Still today, Maria Laura cannot understand what happened, why the lorry

driver didn't see her or why they were on the emergency lane.

Dancing, once a source of joy for Maria Laura, was suddenly out of reach due to her injuries. Rather than losing her heart and her drive, she channeled her anger into achieving new goals.

Maria Laura was guided towards paralympic climbing by Casa dei Risvegli Luca De Nigris, her rehabilitation facility. Based in Bologna, the Centre for Diagnostic and Therapeutic Care Pathways ("Coma to Community") helps people suffering from severe acquired brain injury (sABI) and specializes in rehabilitation for conditions involving prolonged low responsiveness (vegetative state and minimally conscious state) and for severe disabilities for which recovery is slow.

Climbing wasn't love at first sight. It felt grueling and demanding, a far cry from the controlled movements of her physiotherapy. Yet, for Maria Laura, climbing has become a powerful metaphor for life - it's tiring, it's difficult, and it's full of paradoxes. The key, she's learned, is the persistent effort to rise again, to analyze the path forward, and to move with intention. It's about setting ambitious yet achievable goals.

Maria Laura has competed in numerous climbing competitions, and she recently won her first stage of the Italian Paraclimbing Cup in Bergamo. Sport became a significant tool, propelling her forward while instilling resilience. It has also taught her the value of teamwork and mutual support and to share both - moments of triumph and occasional setbacks.

Despite being fully aware of the difficulties she would face, she never hesitated before any opportunities offered by her paralympic climbing coach, Maria Letizia Grasso. She snapped up the chances, including an invitation to participate with us in a week of martial arts in Cesenatico in 2021 and a week of adaptive surfing in 2023, together with a group of other young people, each with their challenge to face.

When we met Maria Laura in 2021, she had recently started walking again with her faithful "Gastone" - a wooden tripod walking stick, which, in the beginning, came with her everywhere. During the week we spent together in Cesenatico, she often had us in stitches with the funny expletives she came out with whenever she fell. And it was pretty often. She never wanted any help getting back up. She was determined to do it herself as her motto is "I wobble, but

I don't give up!"

She is still studying at university and intends to graduate. In the meantime, she keeps traveling with friends and climbs as a Paralympic athlete. Maria Laura is taking her life back and is setting an example for us all of how much you can achieve with determination.

S.

S. was born in 2007 to immigrant parents living in the rural area of the Po Valley in Italy's Emilia Romagna region. His current situation is complicated as he is living on probation in a residential project, supervised by social workers from the juvenile court. Probation is a common sentence issued for young criminal offenders.

With probation, the proceedings are suspended, and the minor is entrusted to the juvenile justice services that work with local authorities to monitor, support, and supervise young offenders. They are expected to be involved in different activities during the probationary period, including sports courses. The activities are intended to reintegrate them into healthy settings where they can work on rules, respect, and act honestly to uphold commitments.

S. loved boxing and 'was good at fighting', he is physically agile, and you can see that he takes care of his body. The closest available sport to boxing was Capoeira, and even though he was not particularly attracted to it, he decided to give it a go.

Initially, he felt that the activity was below him and was defiant most of the time. After two capoeira lessons, S. decided to quit the course. It was too difficult. It takes time before you start seeing results and move like the others. He felt clumsy. It made him quick-tempered and irritable. He was not used to coming last or being the worst. Plus, he was finding it hard to get to the gym, having to wait for ages at bus stops.

He asked to change the activity and try the other option available - indoor climbing. He felt much more at ease here. It wasn't that difficult to reach the training place because it was near the train station. During the trial lesson, he

was asked to reach the top of a room wall without any rules or limits to how the holds could be used. Once harnessed, he climbed up and down the wall a few times with a cocky air.

The instructor commented that he was pretty agile and asked if he had any climbing experience. S. smiled, looked at her, and answered, "Well, not this kind... I used to climb up and down drainpipes when I was breaking into houses."

At the end of the lesson, before leaving, he wasn't sure if he wanted to come back because the activity wasn't hard enough. He couldn't see how it could be useful or learn anything from it. "If you come back, you'll see." was the simple answer.

The following week S. came back, and the actual course began. He found out it's not enough just to get to the top. There are routes you have to follow, some being almost impossible. You have to get there with style, technique, and speed. To stop himself from feeling inferior, he followed the instructions exactly. At first, only one type of hold, then only holds of a certain color, and then 'volumes' were added to the wall to ramp up the challenge.

S. bonded with some of his colleagues and became very good at "belaying" (a set of movements, actions, and techniques to stop someone from falling). He was attentive and meticulous, and the group started appreciating his way of working. When he was belaying, they felt safe.

His enthusiasm grew, and his attitude changed. He started arriving on time and stopped swearing. He began to smile, to thank and greet people, and the rare times he wasn't able to come, he let the trainers know beforehand. Within a couple of months, S. had completely changed the way he interacted with the others.

The appointed social worker, whose job was to supervise and oversee him, had noticed the change and asked to attend some lessons and see what he was like in that setting. We asked S. to teach the social worker what he had learned. Surprised by the request, he set to work with a big grin. He tried to explain the rules correctly and the reasons why certain things had to be done one way rather than another. He pointed out to his social worker that everyone can get to the top, but getting there the right way is a whole different story. He was helpful.

As he learned to climb, S. told us about his need for a buzz, to feel on par with

and accepted by his peer group and the people he hung out with. A little embarrassed, S. talked about his mother's disbelief when she found the police on their doorstep, there to arrest him, along with his group of friends. His parents hadn't noticed anything. They had no idea what he had been getting into, and the memory of his mother's shocked and incredulous look still pains him now.

He talked about how his parents were almost never at home. They worked hard to offer him and his siblings the opportunities they never had growing up in their home country. He talked about how there was nothing to do in the town he lived growing up. There wasn't even a football pitch or basketball court. "We were bored and needed something intense. We were gamers and didn't distinguish between the screen and reality. We started acting the way we did in games and got into trouble. If I'd had the chance to get into some kind of sport, I might not have ended up this way."

S. is getting very good at climbing. We talked to the social workers about him taking part in some competitions.

The positive feedback received from the instructors and the social services was appreciated by the supervisory magistrate, who is now considering the matter. S. didn't choose to do sport. It wasn't voluntary, but it is now one of the priorities. It has brought him into contact with a different world, made up of people with different values. A world that offers him the opportunity to develop latent skills that he was putting to the wrong use. Sport has given him the chance to make different choices. It has opened up possibilities that before he couldn't see. It makes all the effort and all the paperwork needed to join this circuit for reintegration through sport worthwhile!

BEYOND BARRIERS

The photographic exhibition “Beyond Barriers” delves into the theme of inclusion and exclusion in sports, tackling the multifaceted aspects of social disparities, disabilities, and discrimination. Its objective is to promote and encourage sports participation for everyone.

The two artists who embraced the theme chose different approaches.

Dan Vladimir Gologan documents four powerful stories of inclusion. He complements each image with a concise, descriptive paragraph, bringing the viewer deeper into the lives of his subjects. The photographs capture real people engaged in their everyday activities.

Luca Rivi adopted a comparative approach, juxtaposing two images in each composition. One image portrays exclusion (black and white), while the other showcases inclusion (color). The protagonists featured in the photos are volunteers of the Italian Red Cross, Castellarano Committee (RE), or members of the association Il Cassetto dei Sogni.

Dan Vladimir Gologan



Seven years have passed since Dumitru Șandru suffered a spinal cord injury. “I fell from a cherry tree. You know how it is. The ripest cherries are always at the very top.”, he explains with a bitter smile.

Dumitru works for the Motivation Foundation, where he prepares wheelchairs for users and assists them in adjusting to their new lives. He discovered his passion for adapted kayaking and basketball. “I’m not afraid of exposure. I always encourage others: Go out. We need the world to see us.”, he affirms.





Daniela Tălmăciu, aged 54, suffers from flaccid paraplegia. “She never misses a chance to come to training. She is very ambitious.”, her coaches say.

“When we’re in the water, we’re just like everyone else. I believe many more people would give it a try if they had the chance.”, she declared.





Kayak Champions is the first kayak-canoe sports club in Bucharest, catering to both children and adults, professional athletes, and recreational paddlers, including people with fewer opportunities. “Paddle for Life!” is a sports therapy and social inclusion program for individuals from various disadvantaged backgrounds.

In recent years, Romania has seen an influx of foreign immigrants, with the majority coming from South Asia. In 2024 alone, the Romanian government approved a quota of 100,000 newly admitted foreign workers to the labor market.



Cricket, introduced to South Asia by the British during colonial rule, has evolved to be the region's most popular sport. Over two centuries, it has become deeply woven into the cultural fabric.





Even though cricket shares many similarities with our national sport, oina, and despite the presence of a cricket federation in Romania, the infrastructure dedicated to this sport is almost nonexistent.



The photographs were shot in Vacaresti Natural Park, where the presence of cricket players has sparked controversy. Vacaresti Natural Park became a protected area in 2016, following a meticulous process of research, documentation, lobbying, and civic mobilization. The main concern regarding playing cricket in the park is the potential negative impact on the ecosystem.

The players featured in the photos estimate that there are approximately 20 cricket teams in Romania comprised solely of Sri Lankan players. Additionally, many foreign players are actively involved in the professional cricket league in Romania.





George Balta was a young senior rugby player when, during a match, he severely injured his spine.

The initial medical prognosis was unfavorable for his survival. However, after undergoing surgery, enduring 21 critical days, spending seven weeks in bed, and five months in the hospital, he defied the odds and was able to leave the hospital in a wheelchair.



With time, George shifted his perspective and began to view the accident, once a source of despair, as the best thing that happened to him. He came to understand that the simple things are the ones that matter the most.





Since 2014, he has been an ambassador of Wings for Life World Run, a running competition organized to raise funds for Spinal Cord Research. Unlike most running competitions, participants don't have to cover a specific distance or run toward a fixed finish line. Instead, the finish line, represented by the "Catcher Car" pursues the runners and rollers, either physically or virtually through the app, until they are caught.

George is now a TEDx speaker, marathonist, and ultra-marathonist wheelchair runner. He is also an influencer dedicated to raising awareness of the challenges faced by people with disabilities and inspiring others through his journey.





Anastasia Bonderenko, a 19-year-old originally from Odesa, Ukraine, sought refuge in Romania one month after Russia invaded her country.



Her love for horses began in her childhood. After a break of several years, she rediscovered the joy of horseback riding. “I’m truly in love with these animals, even though I’m aware how dangerous they can be.”, she remarked.



Anastasia studies American Studies in Bucharest and also works as an English teacher for Ukrainian children.

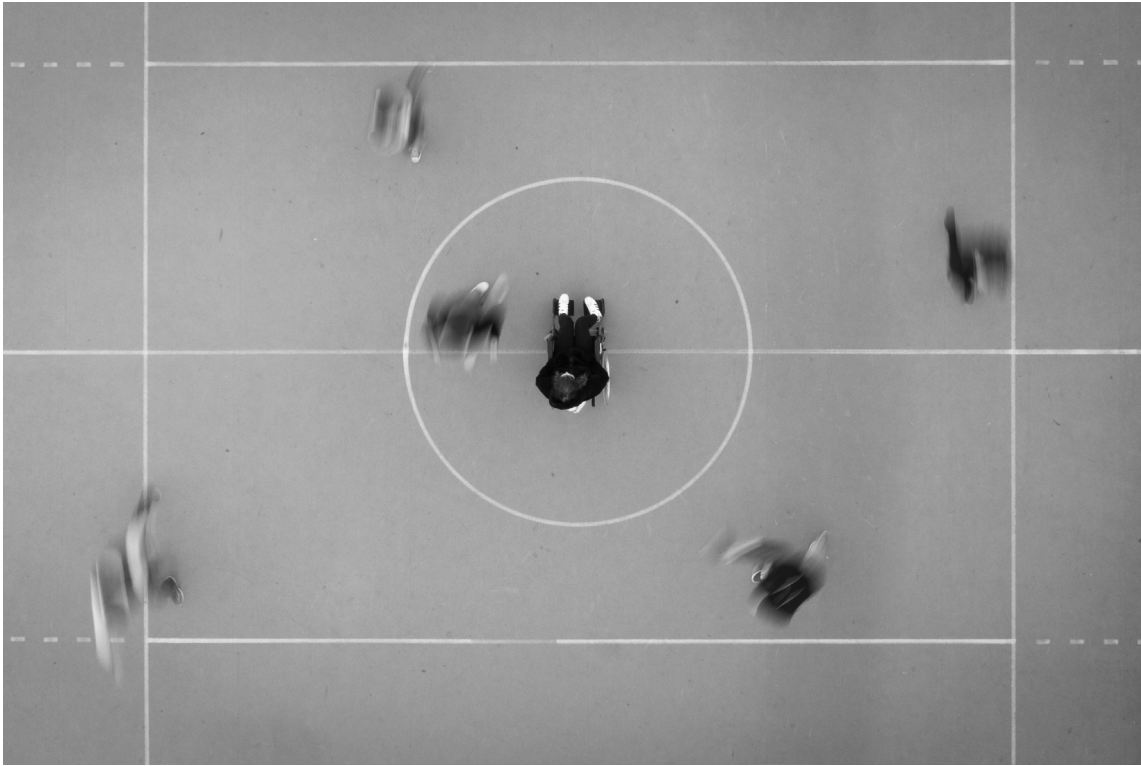
After informing her horse-riding coach about being Ukrainian, Anastasia was offered an opportunity to help with the horses on weekends. In exchange for her assistance, she would receive one free lesson each week.





Despite the kindness and support she's received in Romania, Anastasia's heart remains in Ukraine. She longs to return home as soon as it's safe.

Luca Rivi



An image of inclusion in team play during a basketball game, where a boy in a wheelchair moves within the group as they pass him the ball, contrasted with the image of exclusion where the boy in the wheelchair is immobile in the center of the court while his teammates run around him.





In a chess context, historically a symbol of gender exclusion, an image of inclusion is represented by three figures sitting side by side making the same move, symbolizing the female, male, and non-binary genders, contrasted with the image of exclusion from a chess game played by two male players, with the figures of other players on the side blurred and facing downward.





Religion can become a discriminating barrier, separating people. In black and white photos, the presence of the veil symbolizes a possible form of religious discrimination, with a girl being excluded from the game while the game is meant to be a symbol of cultural and religious barriers. Conversely, in inclusive photos, the girls collaborate and play together, demonstrating that inclusion can overcome religious divisions and promote unity and mutual acceptance



Financial difficulties can represent a social barrier, however, sports are not excluded as a means of unity. Here, a girl is depicted who, due to her financial difficulties, wishes to dance but is forced to remain on the sidelines while her friends dance. This image symbolizes the challenges people face due to their financial circumstances. In the inclusive image, the girl is integrated and accepted into the group, demonstrating that sports can be a means to overcome economic barriers and promote social inclusion and solidarity.



To overcome the hurdle of economic or skill diversity, representing the dual aspect of diversity, depicted in these photos through two balls. In the exclusion picture, one ball is deflated while the other is 'normal' inflated, whereas, in the inclusive picture, a single deflated ball is held and supported by two people, symbolizing mutual assistance in the face of challenges.



A game of pinochle where the cards transition from invisible and smooth to tangible. The underlying theme is the creation of new tools for inclusion. In the exclusion image, a blind person is isolated and unable to participate in the game. In the inclusion image, one can notice the detail of a card with the upper corner marked in Braille, transforming the cards from invisible to tangible for those who cannot see.



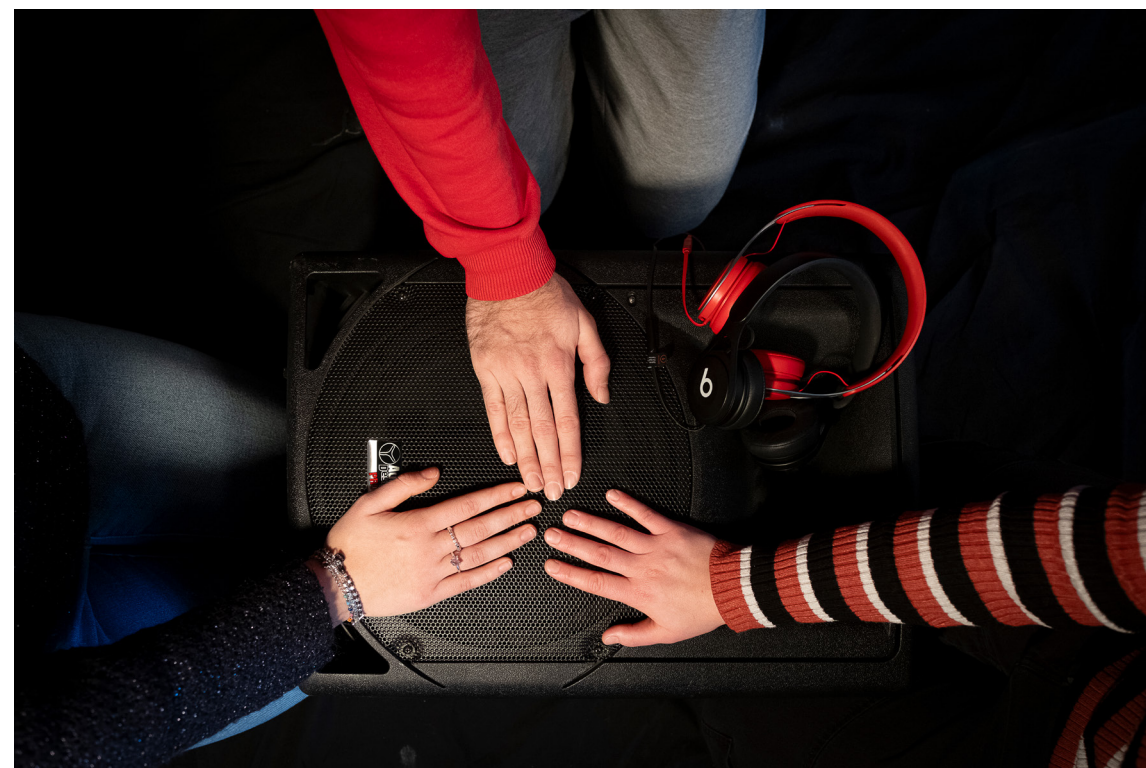


In this context exploring inclusion in sports, the fundamental theme is that sports know no limits of ability. In the representation of exclusion, a girl in a wheelchair wishes to climb on the swing but shows expressions of helplessness and frustration while watching others having fun. However, in the inclusion image, the same girl successfully uses specially designed inclusive equipment, allowing her to enjoy the swing, expressing joy and determination.



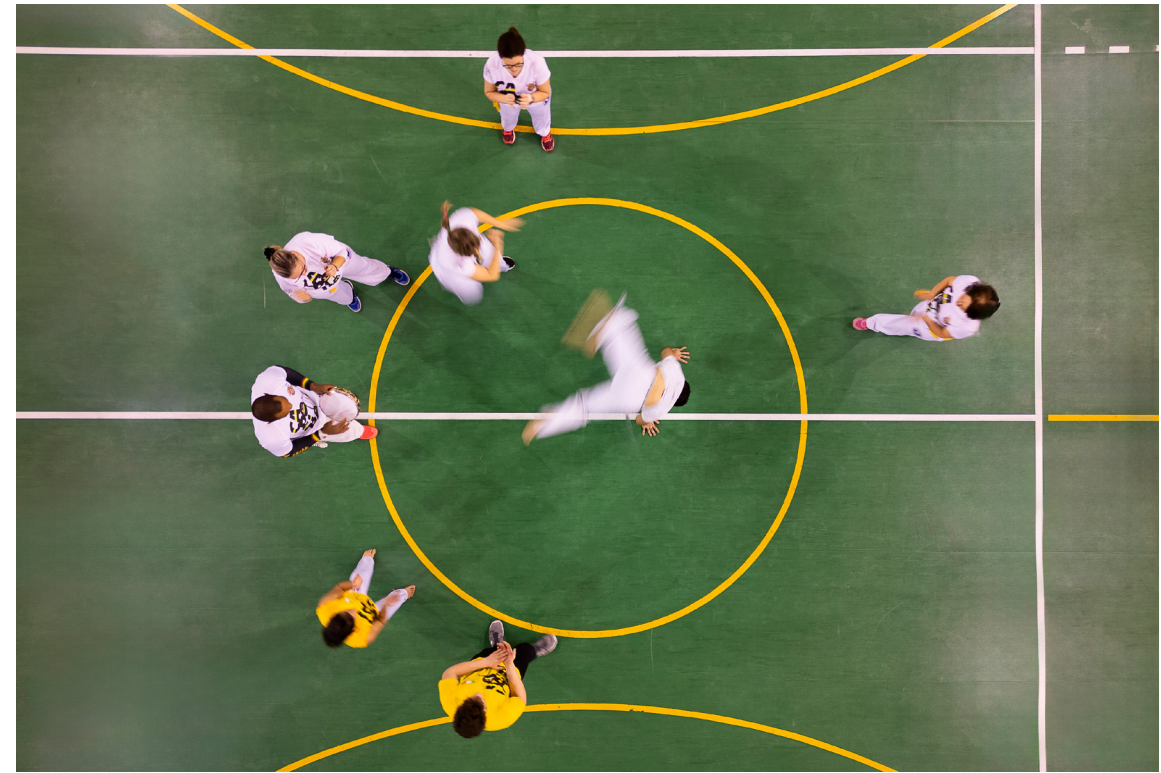


Music, often an anchor of unity among young people, can sometimes lead to isolation. However, thanks to alternative methods of sharing and inclusion, such as when a deaf person joins others wearing headphones to perceive the vibrations of a musical box through touch, it is possible to overcome this isolation and promote full and inclusive participation.



The two images represent the evolution of capoeira over time. In the first photo, the chained hands symbolize slavery and oppression, reflecting the original exclusion of capoeira practitioners. In the second image, the hands breaking the chains represent liberation from slavery and the transformation of capoeira into an art of resistance and freedom. This contrast highlights the history of resilience and determination of capoeira practitioners, also emphasizing the importance of inclusion, as capoeira has become a means to unite people, overcoming historical barriers, and promoting unity and equality.





In the image of exclusion, we see a solitary person engaged in practicing capoeira, reflecting a sense of isolation and separation. On the other hand, in the image of inclusion, several people dance together, highlighting the unity and harmony that capoeira can inspire. These two contrasting perspectives illustrate the complexity of social dynamics and the importance of promoting inclusion in our communities.

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